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DOUBLE DAN, THE DASTARD; or, THE PIRATES OF THE PECOS.

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AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



THE VERY HAIR UPON THE CAPTIVES' HEADS SEEMED TO CRAWL LIKE SCORCHED SERPENTS. AND A PIERCING SHRIEK—YES, SHRIEK AFTER SHRIEK—SPRANG FROM THE CRACKED AND BLEEDING LIPS OF EACH.

Double Dan, the Dastard;

OR,

The Pirates of the Pecos.

BY MAJOR SAM. S. HALL,

("BUCKSKIN SAM,")

AUTHOR OF "THE ROUGH RIDERS," "MERCILESS MART," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN AL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE HEIRESS OF BIG BEND.

IN the year of grace 185-, there was within a beautiful bend of the Rio Brazos, Texas, a fine mansion, with stables, outbuildings, and a long row of negro cabins, these being owned by Captain Richard Ray, as well as large tracts of land extending south from, and up and down, the noble river we have mentioned.

Vast fields of golden corn and snowy cotton waved in the breezes, which blew fresh and cool from the Mexican Gulf but fifty miles eastward, these fields being to the south of the mansion, and the towering trees of the bottom timber.

Around the dwelling were tastefully-laid-out gardens, dense flowering shrubbery, arbors covered with vines and creepers, and approached by sandy paths, bordered by dark-green box; while to the west, east and north, on the verge of the bottom timber, were two rows of beautiful magnolias, these being the outer guards of orange and lemon orchards and flower-gardens.

The mansion was two stories in height, with a wide veranda on three sides, from each of which one could sit facing the gracefully-curving crescent of magnolias, which swept around the bend, all at an equal distance from the river.

Within the timber the dead branches and brambles had been removed, allowing free passage by winding ways here and there through the dense green shades; but with this exception nature had been allowed her own way, unmarred by the hand of man. Almost impenetrable thickets were to be seen on all sides, and at some points the river bank was quite perpendicular—it being fifty feet down to the waters. These teemed with fish, turtles and alligators.

Captain Ray was an old Texan, a veteran of the Mexican war, after which struggle he had returned to his home in Louisiana. There he married the one woman whom he had ever loved and then migrated with all his earthly possessions to the Rio Brazos, where we first bring him and his before the reader.

And well off in this world's goods was the captain, as has been mentioned, or intimated, by our description of his plantation, he having some fifty slaves and as delightful a home as one could wish. At the time of which we write Rosa Ray, the daughter of the ex-army-officer, was about fifteen years of age, she having been born on the Bend Plantation, as the captain termed his home, her mother having died some years previous to our introduction.

However, the daughter of Richard Ray had never to any great extent been dependent on the care of her mother, she having been from infancy taken in charge by a middle-aged negress, whose only duty was to watch over her idolized little mistress.

From this, and from the fact that her mother was a great invalid, the little Rosa's grief at the death of her parent must have been much less than if she had been her constant companion.

Rosa was a sprightly little elf, of medium height, and well-developed form; piquant, full of life and high spirits, always flitting hither and thither in search of pleasure, excitement, or adventure—like a bee from flower to flower. Her merry laugh and joyous song were heard from morning until night from the innermost sweep of the Bend to the negro cabins.

She was beloved by all, and almost worshipped by the blacks, both old and young, of both sexes, and Bend Plantation seemed deserted if she chanced to be absent now and then at a neighboring planter's for a day's visit.

The young girl had a favorite pony, upon which she frequently rode afar out on the prairies in search of wild flowers, and the intoxicating pleasure of a rapid gallop over the smooth sward.

She also fished, boated, and practiced with her little rifle in the river-bottom, or climbed to some perch, a favorite resort of hers, in the moss-draped trees, to peruse her books.

An aunt from Louisiana resided at Bend Plantation as housekeeper after the death of Mrs. Ray, and she being an educated lady—as education ran in that latitude—took upon herself the task of teaching her niece at the request of the captain, who could not endure the thought of sending his darling away from home to a boarding-school, as he felt that life would be almost insupportable without her.

Rosa's every wish was gratified; indeed, she was in a fair way of becoming a spoiled child, until the advent of the aunt referred to somewhat changed the course of affairs. The reasonings of that excellent lady with the captain opened the eyes of the latter to the fact that he had been treating Rosa more like a boy than a girl.

Our heroine's hair was dark-brown and hung in rich and wavy abundance over her graceful, well-rounded shoulders. Her eyes were a changing blue, almost black when she became excited, and were shaded by long lashes. Her nose was perfectly Grecian, her lips like Cupid's bow, and almost continually parted in smile or laughter, showing small, even, pearly teeth.

Her skin was fair, the bloom of health resting upon her cheeks, and there was a vivacity and flash in her eyes that was charming to the beholder. Her movements were as graceful as were those of her pet, Lulu, the prairie fawn, that frequently accompanied her about the Bend.

As we have mentioned, the every wish of the little maiden was anticipated by her father, she being indulged in every whim; but, as she grew older, and more especially at the time when we propose to follow her footsteps more closely than mere mention, Captain Ray became most particular and watchful in regard to her associates, he being determined that Rosa should form no warm friendships, indulge in no flirtations, or become attached to any of the opposite sex.

He looked upon the young men in that vicinity as a set of jackanapes, unworthy to perform even menial service for his queenly daughter. Not only this, but he selfishly resolved that he would always keep her with him—that no man should win her as his bride. The old captain was some excusable for this, as he felt from the bottom of his soul that his heart would break if he were deprived of the society of his cherished child.

And Rosa was much the same in disposition as her father. In some respects, indeed, she was quite willful and stubborn, and the oft-repeated warnings that were given her—more like commands—in regard to forming associations with the opposite sex, only served to interest her in them the more—to bend her thoughts more upon the subject. This was quite natural. She resolved that, did opportunity offer, she would flirt to her heart's content with any presentable young gentleman whom she might meet—and that regardless of her father's commands, the first and only restrictions he had ever sought to place upon her movements or inclinations.

From the fact that Rosa Ray had resided at the Bend all her life, never having been far from home, and then only for a brief period, she knew little of the world or its people—except such knowledge as she gained from her books, or from her aunt.

The latter was a maiden lady—in fact a confirmed old maid, and an inveterate hater of the stronger sex in general.

Consequently, Rosa, had she believed one-half of what she was forced to listen to from father and aunt—the former seeming to lose sight of the fact that he was himself a man—would have prayed earnestly that she might never be brought in contact with one of the horrid creatures.

This state of affairs was explained by the young lady to a female friend of her own age, with much fun and laughter on our heroine's part, she considering it quite a joke, stating that she believed that her papa, should he discover her in company with a young gentleman, would in the future "stake her out" on the lawn, to prevent her straying from the plantation.

Rosa's girl friend, as a matter of course, related, word for word, to her companions and friends that which Rosa had confided to her; and this awakened quite as much interest on the part of the young men of the neighborhood as did the prospective wealth of the little beauty, serving—as was no more than natural—to draw attention to her, rather than hinder them from forming her acquaintance.

The plantations on the Rio Brazos, at the time of which we write, were, in most instances, many miles apart, any planter living within fifty miles, or a day's ride, being considered a neighbor.

Just opposite the main entrance to the mansion of Captain Ray was a wide path, which extended in a straight line to the magnolias, which were but a rifle-shot away; but, beyond that line of trees, one must proceed by other and winding paths, amid the undergrowth of the bottom timber, to reach the river at the outermost curve of the Big Bend.

Here the bank had been dug away, affording an easy descent to the water's edge, where a little artificial cove had been formed, within which was secured the boat that Rosa frequently rowed over the deep, slow-moving waters to the opposite shore, or up and down the river, as her sweet fancy led her.

A platform, or boat-landing, had also been built for her. This was arched by overhanging branches, and "old man's beard," or drooping festoons of Spanish moss. The branches sustained a hammock, proving that this was a

favorite retreat of the fair heiress of Bend Plantation.

And now, having described our lovely heroine, and her charming surroundings—her life, up to the age of fifteen, having been a veritable summer's dream, without aught of incident or accident to mar her happiness, if we except her mother's death, we will proceed to detail her strange and soul stirring experiences from the age mentioned, when the Fates seemed suddenly to have become aware of her existence and poured out a torrent of wrath, misfortune and calamity, not only upon her devoted head, but, through her, hurled misery and anguish upon her old father, her aunt, and their faithful slaves.

CHAPTER II.

A VILLAIN AND HIS PALS.

ON a most beautiful and balmy afternoon, about a week after Rosa Ray had revealed to her girl friend the expressed opinions of her father and aunt in regard to the young men of the day, and the commands she had received from her relatives that she should avoid forming the acquaintance of any of the opposite sex, a party consisting of half a dozen of the sons of neighboring planters was encamped some five miles above Bend Plantation in a picturesque place beneath the timber on the bank of the Rio Brazos.

A small pack of hounds that were secured to bushes and lay outstretched on the ground panting laboriously, together with the fact that quite a quantity of game hung from the lower branches of the trees, indicated that the young men had been on an extensive hunt, and the condition of their horses, which were lariat to the branches of the trees, proved that they had ridden long and fast.

An old negro bent over the camp fire, engaged in preparing coffee and broiling venison and bacon, and the young men were seated in a group, their hats thrown behind them, while a flask of liquor was being passed from one to another.

The hunting-party had not been in their camp more than ten minutes, they having just relieved their horses of their equipments and cast themselves upon the sward, all showing signs of fatigue. Had they reached this point, which they had chosen for a camp, but five minutes sooner, and glanced through the branches upon the river, they would have discovered a boat with a single occupant, a young man who bent to his oars, causing the skiff to shoot into a small cove overarched with branches. This bank was not twenty paces from the spot which was soon after chosen by the hunting-party for an encampment.

Making his boat fast to a drooping limb, the young man tore a number of long festoons of moss from the trees overhead, and cast them into the boat. He then, placing his coat upon the forward seat for a pillow, reclined upon the moss, in a languid manner, seeming greatly fatigued.

That this young man was ignorant of the proximity of the hunting-party, was evident from his sudden start to a sitting posture, when the hunters, with considerable noise, urged their horses into the clear space above, and near him. Not only this, but he was able from overhearing their voices, to identify the unexpected arrivals; who had, by their noisy entree, aroused him from a semi-somnolent state.

However, from the fact that he did not reveal himself, one would decide that, although he was acquainted with the intruders upon his solitude and slumber, he had nothing in common with them, or wished not to associate with them.

The young man himself was a perfect Apollo, of noble mien and bearing, and with a splendid physique, and superb muscular development.

He was probably not more than twenty years of age, his face sunburned but handsome, his eyes hazel and piercing, his brow broad and high, indicating superior intelligence. A slight mustache ornamented his lip, and a small imperial his chin.

A scornful look came into his face, as the voices reached his ears, revealing a set of even teeth that were white as polished ivory.

A single glance into his face would decide a physiognomist that he was honest, brave, and fearless—one, whom all the gold in the world would not tempt to swerve from what he believed to be his duty.

Resuming his recumbent position and listless attitude, the youth seemed not to deem the new arrivals worthy of further notice; and, doubtless he would have pulled his boat to some cove out of hearing of their conversation, could he have accomplished it without being observed. His countenance betrayed no fear, however; but simply a disinclination to reveal his presence to those who, for some reason, he seemed to dislike.

It was evident that he wished, if possible, to avoid overhearing the neighboring party as they conversed among themselves; but the expression of deep annoyance, which was his at the first, soon gave place to manifestations of deep interest, mingled with indignation, at the words

he was forced to hear, and which we will record.

It is unnecessary for us to enter into any particular description of the young men who lay upon the sward in the encampment, with one exception.

He who appeared to be the leading spirit of the party, was of medium height, and thin in flesh, but showed evidence of great strength and quick movements.

His hair was dark as midnight, as were his brows, lashes, mustache, and imperial. So, also, were his deep-set, treacherous eyes, that rolled nervously about in a suspicious manner.

His skin was swarthy, and, in short, his general appearance was repelling, and calculated to create aversion in the mind of an acute observer.

He was clad in a rich hunting-costume, and his arms were highly ornamented with silver filagree work; his dissolute companions evidently looking up to him as a superior. The whisky-flask, which was passed around the circle, was returned to the young man we have described, who drank again, saying, in a surly, and indignant voice, to the negro who was busy at the camp-fire:

"Here, you Dan, pass my canteen, will you? And, if you haven't filled it with fresh water, skip lively and do so. Do you think I am going to burn the skin off my throat with this infernal strong liquor, and nothing to wash it down with?"

"Fo' de Lor', Mars' Louis," explained the slave, in evident fear, "I done disremembered dat wata'! Dar's sich a befty 'mount fer ole Dan ter do dat he's sorter flustered."

The canteen lay within reach of "Mars' Louis," and the old negro hastened to the river, filled it and returned as if life depended upon his haste.

Feigning to be strangling, Louis Le Grand, for such was the young man's name, clutched the canteen and drank quickly. He then hurled a billet of deadwood at the retreating negro, striking the slave a powerful blow in the back, and causing the poor old fellow to bound in the air and utter a howl of mingled pain and apprehension, proving that he had good reason to fear his brutal master.

A chorus of laughter burst from the lips of the young men which seemed greatly to please their ruffianly leader, who, a moment after, arose to a sitting posture, crying out, as if some important thought had suddenly struck him:

"Boys, now I think of it, we can't be more than five miles above Bend Plantation, and that brings to mind the fact that I have resolved to form the acquaintance of Miss Rosa Ray, whose old man has forbidden her associating with the young gents of the neighborhood.

The girls say she is a gay one and pretty as a pink, which, of course, is not one-half what she merits, or they wouldn't admit that much. Rosa is a great catch, for the old captain is well-fixed and she is his only child. I tell you, boys, I'm going for her the first chance that opens."

"And you'll slip up on the game, Louis," asserted one of his companions. "The old Cap is a rager as far as Rosa is concerned, and she is full of fire and vim and good solid sense."

"Have you seen her, Jim?" asked Louis.

"Yes. She has visited our ranch. My sis is a chum of hers, and I will say honestly, Rosa Ray is the prettiest girl on the Brazos."

"I'll back you on that," put in another. "She's an angel, you bet, and I'll wager my horse against a jackass-rabbit that she takes no notice of you, Louis, if you push your acquaintance, which, by the way, is the only way you can gain hers."

"Boys, you don't know me yet, I see," said Le Grand, stroking his chin with an air of proud superiority. "When I set my mind on an object, I am bound to carry it out, if the devil himself stood in my path. I'll bet you each a hundred dollars against ten that I'll not only introduce myself to Rosa Ray at the Bend, within a week, but I shall be on intimate terms with her."

"I admit, however, that I propose to accomplish my object without the old Cap being aware of what is going on. There's a chance, pards, for you to make a small stake, or to lose a smaller, if you feel so inclined."

"I take that bet," said Jim, quickly.

"And I! And I! And I," ran around the circle.

"All right!" said Le Grand, drawing an account book from his pocket, and writing in it, rapidly.

"I'll record it, boys. I have you all foul. I'll win that bet, or die trying."

"When do you make your first advance upon Castle Ray, or the Princess Ray, I should say rather?" asked Jim.

"Never you mind when," replied Louis. "I said I'd be on intimate terms with Rosa within a week. It's none of your business how or when I proceed, provided I prove at the end of it that the little maiden who has lived so secluded a life, will meet me as a friend on the bank of the Brazos. You shall all view our meeting from the opposite side, and then decide whether I have won or lost my wager."

At this moment Dan, who had approached the bank of the cove where the young man lay in the boat, in search of wood for the camp-fire, threw up his hands in amazement; then, suddenly recovering his presence of mind, he quickly bent to the earth, hoping, from the bottom of his honest heart, that he had not been noticed—for the old negro recognized, in the occupant of the boat, one whom he revered exceedingly.

But, at the very moment of discovery, the young man had fallen into a slumber, induced by fatigue and heat, and his reclining position.

Previous to this, however, he had heard the words of Louis Le Grand, and had fought against somnolence, but without avail.

Old Dan's movements, although quickly suppressed, had been observed by his master, who cried out:

"What in the devil is the row with my nigger?"

At the same moment he sprung to his feet and stalked silently forward toward the cove. Old Dan was muttering to himself, as he glided along in a half-bent position, picking up sticks.

Louis Le Grand soon reached his slave, when the latter continued his labor, not appearing to observe him. Le Grand peered through the branches, his hand upon his revolver. Suddenly he caught sight of the sleeping man in the boat, and his face at once contorted with rage and hatred; the latter toward the sleeper, the first toward the slave.

At this moment the companions of Louis reached the side of the latter, when he raised a hand in gesture for them to halt, and gave a low hiss of caution.

One look satisfied Le Grand that the sleeper was in a deep slumber—that it was no sham—and his features changed their expression to one of exultation as he said in a hoarse whisper:

"Boys, this is most fortunate. There sleeps my worst enemy—Leroy Randolph, the only man on the Brazos whom I cannot look in the eye, the only man who creates a feeling akin to fear in my heart, and who assumes the airs of a superior. You all know how he met me in the duello. I insulted him, I admit, and I did not believe he had the 'sand' to face me at fifteen paces, because he professed to be averse to dueling. I forced him into a meeting, and he humiliated me, as you all know."

"I fired before the word, and missed him, and then he had me at his mercy; but, in a fury, I raised my revolver for a second shot. Then he fired, cutting off my finger, and destroying my aim, and so the duello was decided 'off.' But I haven't forgotten that day. I swore revenge, and now is my time."

"Retire from this spot, boys, as I wish no witnesses. I shall not murder him; only turn him adrift on the Brazos, without oars."

He said this last, as he saw that his words had produced horror among his companions.

The eyes of Louis Le Grand blazed with frantic fury and a craving for revenge as he clutched his revolver and gazed threateningly upon his craven comrades. Fearing for their lives, without a word of remonstrance they stalked toward the opposite side of the camp and disappeared in the undergrowth, leaving old Dan by the fire, his form trembling from head to foot, and his eyes sticking out in terror as he gazed toward his master. The latter, with a diabolical expression on his face, shook his fist menacingly at the poor old negro, who seemed chained to the spot, incapable of movement.

Only for a moment did Louis Le Grand stand thus. Then he sunk from view, stealing down the bank of the cove, to the boat and its sleeping occupant.

With movements, silent and cautious as those of a panther, Louis Le Grand removed the oars from the boat, and slipped the young man's rifle over into the water, the same sinking instantly from view; he then, with the greatest care, severed the rope, and pushed the skiff out slowly from the cove into the river.

Having accomplished this, the miscreant gained the upper bank, and gazed out over the waters; his face exultant and fiendish in expression, as he saw the boat glide swiftly down the Rio Brazos in mid-channel, on toward the Mexican Gulf!

The handsome face of Leroy Randolph was just discernible, resting upon the pillowed prow.

As the boat disappeared around a bend, Le Grand half whirled in his tracks, and gazed with the ferocity of some maddened, half-starved beast of prey toward the camp; gazed but a moment at his slave, who, with ashen face, and quivering form, his startled eyes fixed upon the point where he had last seen the boat on the swift current, stood frozen in his tracks.

The sight maddened his master. With a fierce oath, Le Grand sprung forward, seized a billet of wood, and whirling it in the air, brought it down with terrific force upon the head of his old slave.

With a groan of agony and terror, poor old Dan dropped to the earth like a log, senseless; his gray wool mingling with the ashes of the camp-fire, which would soon have burned into

his brain, had not his brutal and cowardly master given him a kick, that sent him away from the coals and flame.

CHAPTER III.

ROY AND ROSA.

"LULU! O-o-oh, Lulu!"

Thus called out Rosa Ray, as she sprang from the window of her music-room out upon the veranda, an hour or so previous to the scenes detailed as having occurred up the Brazos at the hunting-camp of Louis Le Grand.

Then, as the cry left her lips, there came in a far different tone of voice—one that was blended with a half shriek of fright—an answering call from a distance. Rose burst into a merry peal of laughter, saying, as soon as her mirth subsided:

"Oh, dear! aunt Roxie, I didn't know you were here. I was calling Lulu. Have you seen my little fawn?"

Miss Roxanna Ray, the maiden sister of the captain, who had been in a half-dozing state, sprang upright in dread affright as her niece bounded from the window, calling out loudly the name of her pet. Then, as the young girl gave her apology and explanation, the lady returned:

"My dear Rosa! I do most sincerely hope that you will be more lady-like and circumspect in your manner and actions as you grow older. I have requested you often of late to be less rude. Why, you gave me a terrible fright, and I shall suffer from one of my nervous headaches in consequence."

"I had been reading an account, in the San Antonio Herald, of an Indian massacre on the Medina river, and was dreaming of the horrible particulars when your outcry—which appeared to me to be the war-whoop of the Comanches—burst on my ears. Please step into my room and bring me my camphor."

Rosa stood for a moment gazing into her aunt's face, from which the traces of fright had not yet disappeared, her eyes expressing the utmost amusement; then, unable to control the mirth produced by the good lady's look of terror, she darted back through the window, almost shrieking with laughter, which sounded through the mansion, gradually dying down to a musical ripple, and again bursting forth uncontrollably. She delayed her return with the camphor, endeavoring, with all her power of will, to suppress her mirth; but the ludicrousness of the situation was too much, and Rosa was forced to appear before aunt Roxie in a state of most humiliating embarrassment, for she really loved her relative, and was far from wishing to displease her or hurt her feelings.

However, the laughter of the young girl was contagious, and, before she had returned, aunt Roxie had herself seen the funny side of the picture, and her usually sedate countenance was wreathed with smiles. This greatly relieved Rosa, but brought about another burst of laughter.

"Laugh, child! Laugh!" said her aunt. "I do not blame you for it. It was certainly most ridiculous to imagine your cry to be an Indian war-whoop."

"And not very complimentary to me, either, auntie; but I must tell papa, so he can enjoy the joke. I do wish you could have seen yourself in a mirror as you started up with that look of terror. I know I should have been forced to laugh, even had real bona fide war-whoops sounded at the moment through the Bend. But here is your camphor. I hope you don't feel faint?"

"You gave me quite a shock, Rosa, but I shall soon be myself again. The revulsion in my feelings, from fright to mirth, has caused a favorable reaction. I did fear a rush of blood to my brain. Where are you going, my dear?"

"Down to the landing, auntie. Oh! here comes Lulu, searching for me."

Rosa gave a low bird-like whistle, and a beautiful spotted fawn sprang to her side, rubbing its graceful head and neck against her hand, its large violet eyes gazing lovingly up into her face in a yearning manner.

Stooping down the fair girl caressed the lovely creature for a moment, and then continued, in rapid speech:

"Don't send for me, aunt Roxie, for I intend to read in my hammock until I fall asleep. A two hours' siesta after finishing my story will be quite refreshing. I have my lessons perfect. I am really sorry I awoke you, auntie, but I hope you will finish your nap now, without being scalped in your dreams. By-by, aunt Roxie! Come, Lulu!"

Thus speaking, Rosa sprang from the piazza and down along the sandy path toward the magnolias and the river bottom, without waiting for any reply or suggestion from her relative, Lulu, the fawn, bounding by her side.

A few moments after our heroine was reclining in her hammock beneath the cool shades, the dreamy swaying of the same and the ripple of the waters below being conducive to sleep. And but a short interval passed after fastening her eyes upon the printed page when her lids drooped, her long lashes lay motionless upon her fair rosy cheeks, her red lips parted and her bosom rose and fell regularly.

Rosa Ray was in the land of dreams, and Lulu, the fawn, lay upon the bank near at hand, on a level with the hammock of its mistress, watching, with listless eyes and an indolent motion of the head, the long wavy tresses of Rosa that hung afar below from over the hammock side, and swaying with the motion of the couch.

The buzz of insects and the musical song of the birds, together with the very air one breathes, heavy with the perfume of magnolia, lemon and orange blossoms, mingled with the balsamic scent of the bottom timber—all these, as well as the silvery ripple of the waters amid the reeds and the balmy breezes, tend toward producing sleep, and when asleep to deepen slumber.

Full two hours passed thus, Rosa sleeping silent and peaceful as an infant, when suddenly the fair girl's slumbers seemed to become disturbed, as if dread sights were pictured to her in dreams. Her form writhed convulsively, her beautiful face contorted in fright, that changed to horror, despair and grief, alternately.

And very strange it was that the sleep of our heroine, hitherto so deep and so peaceful, should be thus disturbed, and so suddenly, at a time when around the Bend, approaching nearer and nearer, yet in the middle of the river, glided a boat, within which lay, soundly sleeping, Leroy Randolph—a young man with whom she had never spoken, but who, nevertheless, was to be her fate.

On, speeding in the rapidly increasing current, in the mid-channel of the broad river—on, toward the Mexican Gulf without an oar or aught to guide his little skiff to the shore! On, when soon, undoubtedly before he would awake, the shades of night would enshroud him and the world—thus sped our hero, while Rosa Ray tossed nervously in her hammock, seemingly making great efforts to throw off some oppressive weight upon her brain, and awaken her from her troubled sleep.

We do not presume to offer any explanation of the mysterious influence that seemed to be acting upon the maiden, but merely to state a case that has had many parallels; some, perhaps, within the knowledge of the reader.

Certain it was that two human beings, fated to become much to each other—fated to pass through horrors, tortures, and dread suffering, each on the other's account, yet heretofore utter strangers—were, by some mysterious agency, being brought together, through an incomprehensible magnetism, which was brought to bear upon one of them only; and this one the more sensitive—our heroine!

As the boat of young Randolph shot around the curve, almost abreast of the landing, bearing its sleeping owner on toward the Gulf, Rosa threw off the horrible incubus that seemed to have been almost crushing out her life in her dreams, and sprung to a sitting posture; her eyes, strange to say, becoming at once fixed, in a wild, horrified, and wondering stare of intense bewilderment upon the drifting boat—the handsome face of its occupant being for a moment fully revealed to her, the closed eyes and silent form being typical of death.

Rosa sat like one suddenly bereft of sense and power of motion; dazed with the most intense amazement, dumfounded at the unexpected and incomprehensible sight. She was unable at first to draw a line between vision and reality; the expression upon her face seeming to indicate that the scene before her was in consonance with, or somewhat like that which had ruled her slumbers.

This condition of mind, however, did not last long. She quickly drew her fingers across her eyes, closed them, and pressed the lids for an instant, which act seemed to clear both sight and brain; for she at once slid from her hammock, sprung into her boat, unmoored the same, and grasping the oars, swung the skiff around dexterously. She then shot out over the waters of the Rio Brazos, in a quartering course; and soon after reached a point alongside the drifting boat.

Being still somewhat bewildered, and unable to decide what action was best to take, our heroine, for a moment or two kept her skiff in a course parallel with that of the sleeper. She gazed long and earnestly upon him, and perceived that he was not only alive, but was an exceedingly handsome young man—handsomer, nobler, and more prince-like than any man she had ever met.

A quick glance also revealed the startling fact that there were no oars in the boat, nor anything with which it might be propelled.

Here was a mystery, an unexpected adventure; and each time that Rosa gazed upon the handsome face, the more favorably impressed she became by it, and strange feelings were at her heart, such as she had never before experienced.

But our heroine was not one to remain long inactive or undecided; and she quickly managed her little craft in so skillful a manner as to secure the rope that was attached to a ring in the bow of the stranger's boat. This she fastened to the stern of her skiff, and then proceeded in a quartering course out from the more rapid current, toward the south bank.

This being accomplished in so careful and skillful a manner as not to awaken the sleeper. The remainder of her humane, self-imposed task was more easily performed; and, in ten minutes more she reached the little cove at the Bend, and secured both the crafts to the platform.

This done, she stood looking with girlish admiration down upon the still slumbering form of our hero, a great and sudden transformation having come upon her thoughts and feelings; confusing and overwhelming her mind, and causing her to appear strange to herself.

Before her was one whom she had saved from great peril and suffering, perhaps from death; and she felt a proud sense of some kind of ownership in him. Not only this; but she realized that, in a very strange manner, she had been brought in contact with one, who was one of a thousand—one whom she could, and would love! He was her beau-ideal of all that was brave, and noble, and grand, and whose love would be more precious than gold or gems.

These opinions, so quickly formed, without any grounds except judgment by sight, were, nevertheless, at once firmly rooted in the mind of Rosa Ray; and she put out her hand, caught the gunwale of the stranger's boat, and drew it up close to the platform landing. She then leaned forward, and touched her lips lightly as the kiss of a zephyr upon the brow of Leroy Randolph.

Then, as if the touch had electrified every nerve in his frame, the sleeper sprang upright, at the same time throwing his arms forward extended, as if he, at the moment his slumber was broken, was seeking to embrace some loved one in his dreams.

The young girl felt herself pressed closely in the arms of the stranger, and clasped to his breast; a strange, wild happiness crushing down the alarm she had felt, and not daring to cry out, from her fear of being discovered in such a questionable position.

Rosa was greatly surprised and amazed at this sudden and totally undreamed-of movement on the part of this stranger youth; but her surprise was as naught to that of Leroy himself, who, for a moment or so, knew not whether he was on the earth, or in the mountains of the moon. A hazy impression was floating in his brain, that he had gone over to the majority, and "corraled" his guardian angel, on the better side of the Styx.

But the young girl soon realized her own embarrassing position, and filled with intense excitement and apprehension, fearing discovery by some of her people, she tore herself from the arms of Leroy, and darted up the bank.

One swift, sweeping glance at his surroundings, a lingering look of intense admiration and astonishment into the face of the maiden whom he held in his arms, and the young man's mind became clearer. Then, as the fair girl darted away from him, thoughts of the near past flashed through his mind.

He remembered the conversation of Louis Le Grand and his comrades, and saw at once that he must have fallen asleep. He then reasoned that he had been discovered in that condition, and sent adrift; the absence of his oars and his rifle assisting him to form this conclusion. Then, from the fact that Le Grand had spoken of Rosa Ray, more than from anything else, he believed that the maiden now fleeing up the bank, was she; and that in some inexplicable manner, he owed his present safety and location to her exertions. Her skiff, with its wet oars, being moored alongside his own, was proof positive of this.

All these thoughts came upon him with the rapidity of lightning, and then he dashed at full speed up the bank, and on through the timber, overtaking Rosa at the magnolias.

Our heroine paused as the young man came up, her face, for once, becoming as pale as death, while she trembled from head to foot.

"Do not fear me," said Leroy, hurriedly, "for I claim to be a gentleman. I will not hinder or compromise you, but I feel in my heart that I owe you much."

"I am confident that I address Miss Rosa Ray, and I am somewhat conversant with your surroundings and influences. I am called Leroy Randolph, and this day I have gained some information in regard to yourself. It is important, and I feel that I must see you again."

"Will you meet me to the right of your boat-landing to-morrow evening after sunset? None shall see my approach. I am your friend, most sincerely, and I swear to you that no harm shall come to you through me."

"Only one word from you now; you are Rosa Ray, and you will meet me to-morrow evening?"

"Yes!"

The word came from the maiden's lips spontaneously, without thought; and, as it seemed to her, without an effort or attempt at articulation.

Leroy Randolph grasped her hand and pressed the delicate palm to his lips. He then bounded away toward the river, disappearing in the shades; while Rosa stood silent and motionless

as a marble statue, her eyes fixed upon the swaying branches among which he had vanished, her lips parted, and a strange, hungering, regretful look in her wildly-staring eyes.

But this was only for a moment. Then she raised the hand that the strange youth had kissed to her lips, pressing them upon the same spot.

Rosa Ray had met her fate!

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE TRYSTING-PLACE.

WHEN Leroy Randolph disappeared in the shades of the bottom timber, Rosa Ray remained standing at the same point where he had overtaken and addressed her.

Her mind was confused with strange emotions.

The sound of Leroy's voice still rung in her ears like sweetest music, his face and form being imprinted indelibly upon her mind. A love as lasting—so she felt it—as life, had been born within her heart from the moment that his eyes had looked into hers, piercing her very soul.

She felt that henceforth she belonged to him, and that it would be bliss exquisite, far beyond anything she had ever dreamed of, to be ruled by him, wayward and self-willed as she was.

His touch upon her shoulder had sent ten thousand electric thrills through her frame, and his kiss upon her hand filled her with an ecstasy so strange and intense that it was painful.

Frightened as she had been in regard to being discovered in his presence, or of his being observed by some member of the household, she had at once, without hesitation, promised that she would meet him the following evening clandestinely. And it was a promise that she could not have withheld; for, as she ran through the magnolias, she confessed to herself that the Apollo-like stranger was more to her than all the world, and that she should go mad if she could not meet him again—and soon!

From the first instant that her eyes had met his, and his voice struck her ears, she would have risked life, everything that she held dear, on his being honest and noble, true as steel—and this, although she had never before met a young man except when in the company of others.

He was the first with whom she had been brought face to face alone, and he was her fate; destined to either crush her to earth, hurl her into the dark depths of a despair worse than death, or elevate her to the very seventh heaven of ecstatic joy and bliss, by manifesting a love for her, equal to that which she felt for him.

The heart of the young girl swelled with relief, and pride, and joyousness; as, amid the hundred and one strange thoughts that now flashed through her bewildered mind, she realized that Leroy Randolph had betrayed, by every look, word and act, while in her presence, that he was most deeply impressed by her; his expressive eyes betraying an adoration that was unmistakable, as well as the intense anxiety and suspense that, for an instant, filled them when he asked the favor of an interview on the following evening, and the relief, the pride and joy that he manifested, as her "Yes" sprung from her lips so readily and without hesitation.

Very marvelous to Rosa it was, to find herself ruled by such hitherto undreamed-of thoughts and feelings; especially so, that she had become such a changed being in a moment's time.

She now recalled the fact that the hero of her thoughts was not entirely unknown to her; for she had often heard his name mentioned by her girl acquaintances, and by her father also, and the slaves. But it had ever been in praise, and admiration, and deep regard.

These recollections came to Rosa, in less time than had been employed by Leroy Randolph in regaining the landing; and then she recalled the fact that he had no oars with which to propel his boat, and that he was therefore, in a perplexing, if not helpless condition.

The movements and expression upon the countenance of the maiden indicated, it must be admitted, that she was far from being troubled by the knowledge that it was her manifest duty to proceed at once to the cove, and relieve the young man from his difficulty, by tendering him the use of a pair of oars from her own boat.

She ran at once to the inner row of magnolias, and peered under the branches in the direction of the house; listening for a moment intently, her fair form bent gracefully forward, her wealth of dark brown tresses caressing, in their wild abandon, her cheeks now rosy from excitement and the new-born feeling that possessed her.

She neither heard nor saw anything to indicate that she was observed or missed; although she well knew that a servant would soon be sent out to summon her to tea.

Every step taken by Rosa, was followed by her pet, Lulu; the large and liquid eyes of the fawn gazing in something of wonder at its mistress, as if feeling itself neglected, the coming of Leroy having frightened the little creature

from Rosa's side to an adjacent thicket, its presence being utterly ignored by its hitherto attentive mistress.

When Rosa saw that there was apparently no one in the gardens, or on the veranda, she ran quickly toward the river, passing through the magnolias; and, by a winding path, here and there, around the thickets, in the direction of the river and cove. The sun was now low, near the horizon line, causing the bottom timber to be shrouded in the deepening shadows of approaching night.

On, flitting like a wood-sprite among the shades, the festoons of gray Spanish moss slowly swaying overhead, the weird scene somewhat relieved by the arrows of red sunlight that shot aslant through the foliage—on flew Rosa Ray, the fawn bounding close after her; when suddenly she was greatly astonished, and not a little embarrassed, by springing around a bend of the path, directly into the arms of the one who ruled her every thought—Leroy Randolph!

Only an instant, as she came in contact with a human form, and felt arms clasped about her, did the thought dart through Rosa's mind that she was in the embrace of other than Leroy; but in that instant, a most deathly pang of apprehensive terror convulsed her, causing her the next moment, when she knew it was really her hero, to experience such excessive relief and joy and thankfulness, as more fully revealed to her the extent to which her heart had been taken captive by him.

"Whence, and why so hastily, flies the Belle of the Brazos?" asked the young man, quickly, as he recognized the form of Rosa, who had become limp and helpless in his arms.

The girl trembled as she strove in vain to reply, and the young man, realizing her condition in a measure, and attributing the cause to her sudden surprise and unusual excitement, relieved our heroine by continuing, explaining his own presence.

"I most sincerely regret that I seem to have startled you, Miss Ray, but upon reaching the landing, I found that I had no oars—no means of returning by boat up the river—and I was reconnoitering, puzzled to decide what to do.

"Had I not met you, I should have launched my boat into the river to avoid any suspicions in regard to my having been there, and then made my way through the bottom timber from this vicinity. This I shall now be obliged to do unless you in your kindness take pity on me in my unfortunate position and lend me a pair of oars.

"The Fates have brought us two together in a most remarkable manner, but I did not dream that I should have the pleasure of again meeting you to-night. I thank my lucky stars from my inmost heart and I sincerely pray that neither of us will ever regret that it has so happened. But I already see that I have been the cause of much trouble of mind and apprehension to you, Miss Ray, and that even now I am trespassing not only upon your father's grounds, but upon your good-nature.

"Until to-morrow night then, adieu! May every blessing attend you. And now return, I beg of you, to your home at once."

During the whole time that Leroy was thus speaking, Rosa Ray had not spoken a word—had not even made a single movement, being indeed powerless to do so—but by a powerful effort of will, as he reminded her that she ought to return to the house, she suddenly started forward, exclaiming:

"Hold, Leroy! You forget the oars. Take mine from the skiff. I have an extra pair at the house. I hope you will reach your home in safety. Adios!"

"Ten thousand thanks, Rosa! For so I must claim the privilege of addressing you, since you have done me that favor. I had forgotten the oars entirely, which proves that your presence banishes all thoughts except of yourself from my mind. We meet again I trust when next the sun sinks below the prairies.

"Then I have much to say to you—much that should be made known to you at once.

"Rosa Ray, you have, although such a short time has passed since you and I met in so peculiar a manner, caused a ray of bright golden sunshine to partially banish the clouds which have darkened my sky. Belle of the Brazos, Roy Randolph prays God to bless and guard you now, and always! Good-night."

At this moment the voice of a negro woman was heard from the direction of the magnolias, calling in a high key:

"Miss Rosa! O—o—o—oh, Miss Rosa!"

Leroy immediately darted toward the landing.

The young girl gazed for a brief space, with beating heart, glancing through the branches and beyond the river. As she did so she caught a glimpse of a fiendish face, framed in the foliage of a tree on the opposite bank. It seemed to be bent in a gaze that was almost murderous, down toward the landing where Roy Randolph must have arrived.

This vision, however, vanished quickly, and Rosa could not decide whether it was real or imaginary. Then, as the call of her maid again rung forth, she bounded along the path toward

the magnolias, striving to sing as she went, in her accustomed free and careless way, to relieve the negroes from any alarm on her account.

In a few minutes Rosa had joined her aunt, and appeared to be in even more than her usual good spirits; for the words of Leroy, at their second meeting, proved to her that he had been deeply impressed, entertaining for her, it would almost seem, a feeling that was akin to hers for himself.

But, notwithstanding the many thoughts that had run riot in her mind during her absence at the boat-landing, Rosa forgot not to refer to the fright she had occasioned aunt Roxie, and to the amusement of her father—her good aunt joining in the merriment—related the particulars of the supposed Indian raid, during aunt Roxie's siesta in her chair.

The maiden retired to rest a far different being mentally from what she had been on the previous night. In fact, she was unable to sleep. Thoughts of the strange occurrences of the afternoon, and of her beau-ideal of all that was honest, brave and true—he whom she felt that she loved with all her heart and soul—absorbed her entire being.

Every motion, act and word of his was again recalled, his features being constantly before her mind's eye.

At length it occurred to her that Roy had given her no explanation of how he chanced to be afloat on the river without oars, and this now plunged her into a labyrinth of conjectures and reasonings. She eventually arrived at the conclusion that he must have fallen asleep when the boat was moored in some sheltered cove, and that some enemy had then cut him adrift, with evil intent. This suspicion was born of two facts: first, she had noticed—although it had not occurred to her since—that the rope of the prow of his boat had been cleanly severed by a sharp knife; and secondly, the fiendish face, which at the first she had dismissed as an imaginary vision conjured up by her own excitement, but which she now believed to be that of some one who was acting the spy upon Roy.

Probably this was the very man who had cut the line and sent him adrift, in the hope that he would float out into the Gulf before awaking, and thus perish at sea.

The brain of Rosa had been so demoralized that she found sleep to be out of the question. In fact, the longer she remained on her couch the more anxious and excited she became; and, unable to bear the strain, she arose, dressed herself, and stole out from the house. Calling the watch-dog to accompany her, she proceeded to the landing, as if irresistibly drawn thither.

The thoughts of Roy Randolph, as he gained the cove and secured the oars which he had borrowed, and which he handled as though they were something sacred, were of the maiden whose acquaintance and friendship he had formed in so singular a manner.

Never before had he been so impressed by one of the opposite sex, and he could not but decide that, from the actions and manner of the lovely girl, she felt more than a mere passing interest in him.

From the fact, however, that she had always been kept secluded at Bend Plantation, and not permitted to associate with young men, or to receive such as visitors, he was forced to conclude that her excitement and deep emotion, her innocent trust and apparent forwardness, were due to that circumstance, and not entirely to a suddenly-formed attachment to himself.

Indeed, he was not one who would place such a high estimate upon himself as to jump at the conclusion that every maiden who noticed him particularly, or was at all free in her intercourse with him, had fallen in love with him.

Roy Randolph was far from being a man who was puffed up with an undue sense of his own personal attractions and importance generally; had he been such, he would not be the hero of our tale.

Having secured the oars, Roy sprung into his boat, and was soon gliding swiftly through the waters of the Rio Brazos, keeping near the north bank, and in five minutes the Bend, within which lived Rosa Ray, was hidden from his view by his passing around a curve in the river.

Then, and not till then, did his mind revert to the circumstances connected with his having sought the cove up the river to indulge in sleep, he being greatly fatigued by a long row, the previous night having been spent by him in spearing fish by the light of pine knots, which were sustained over the prow of his boat by a "jack," or framework of portions of iron hoops secured to a pole.

The arrival of the hunting-party and the words of Louis Le Grand, used in connection with Rosa Ray, were deeply more important and of more vital interest, since he had met the beauty of Bend Plantation, who was in danger of being intruded upon, perhaps grossly insulted, certainly greatly annoyed, by the most dissipated, dishonorable and base young man on the lower Brazos—one who had good cause to hate him, for Roy had humiliated him publicly, and proved him to be what he was—an unprincipled coward, devoid of honor or manliness!

As Roy rowed up the river he reasoned out the cause of his having been sent afloat, and he

berated himself mentally for having given himself up to sleep. He was now positive that Louis Le Grand had discovered him while he was in the boat asleep, had stolen his oars and his rifle, and launched him out on the Brazos, in the hope that, as night was approaching, he would be carried by the current down the river so far that, without oars, he would be swept into the Gulf of Mexico, and out upon its broad and stormy bosom to be lost.

Having decided that these conclusions were the correct ones, he next resolved that he would visit the cove and seek "sign" that would give him proofs. Leroy Randolph was now furious.

He had been traduced by this coward, who had thus sought his life a second time, and who now meditated wronging and disgracing a beautiful girl, the only child of an old man, whose life and happiness depended upon her—a mere child in years, but whom he, Leroy Randolph, was proud to call his friend!

Yes; for he had espoused her cause, and that alone would lead him toward revenge.

Henceforth it must be war to the knife between him and Louis Le Grand.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPY ON THE BANK.

AFTER brutally kicking the senseless body of his slave, old Dan, from the fire where he had fallen after Louis Le Grand had felled him with the club, the latter strode forward a few paces toward the point where he and his comrades had reclined previous to his discovery of Roy Randolph, then he came to a sudden halt, his eyes glared around him, his repulsive features contracted with an expression of the most frantic fury, his clinched fists beating the air, while from between his set teeth—his lips curled away from the same, like those of a wild beast—shot the word, half hiss, half articulation:

"Cowards!"

A roving glance had proved to him that the saddles and bridles, together with the rifles and camp "tricks," with the exception of his own, were gone.

A second sweeping and piercing gaze also revealed the fact that the horses of his comrades had been taken from the patch of wild rye where they had been feeding. Striding forward, Le Grand searched the thickets, and then cried out:

"Oh, boys! O-o-oh, boys! Where are you?"

No answer came from the dense shades. No sounds met his ear, except the ripple of the river, the chirp of the birds as they sought their resting places for the night, and the champing of his horse, with that of old Dan and the pack-mule, in the wild rye.

Then Le Grand actually foamed at the mouth, in his wild rage, and tore around the camp like a maniac, swearing that he would shoot his cowardly comrades who had deserted him.

Once before, these same young men, his boon companions in dissipation, reckless gamblers and cheats that they were, had interfered in his plot for avenging himself upon Roy Randolph, by deciding the duello off, on account of his dastardly act in firing before the word.

They had been impressed by the brave and honorable manner of young Randolph, who had not taken advantage of the cowardly shot which had gone wide of its mark; when he might have killed Le Grand, as he proved by shooting the pistol from his hand.

Now the same set of young men, who had so often partaken of his hospitality, and won his money—these same men had deserted him, because he again "made a break" toward getting even with his adversary.

This Roy was brave, honest and honorable, with no peer in strength, beauty of form and face, or dexterity with arms on the Rio Brazos. Le Grand well knew that Roy Randolph was as far above him in all things as is the moon above the earth; and he knew that his comrades entertained the same opinion, although Roy did not associate with them.

As far as that was concerned, Roy had no associates.

As this fact burst on the mind of Le Grand, he exulted in the fact; for, should Roy escape being carried out to sea, there were more openings to avenge himself, than if the young man had been more social in his habits.

One thing was certain. His own comrades had left him, in a cowardly manner, proving that they were afraid they would be implicated, in the event of Roy's death. Or possibly they had so much respect for him, that they would not, in any way, be a party to any injury or wrong done him.

Back and forth, raged Le Grand, having at intervals recourse to his whisky flask, which he now felt thankful had not been appropriated. And, as the fiery liquor began to affect his brain, now made more sensitive by intense fury, thoughts flashed upon his mind which caused him to become more excited and demoralized.

Possibly, indeed probably, the people on some river plantation might discover the flitting boat and its apparently dead occupant, and rescue him.

Then Roy would return to where he had fallen asleep in his boat at the cove, and satisfy him-

self in regard to the identity of those who had sent him afloat without oars or rifle.

It would be impossible to cover the trail, and Roy could easily trace up the party, and then the very deuce would be to pay, for Roy's rifle and oars had been stolen by him.

Then another possibility flashed upon the mind of Le Grand which caused him to quake and tremble from head to heel, and curse himself for a senseless dolt at having adopted a course in accomplishing his revenge which might bring him to the penitentiary.

The great possibility was that Roy might float as far as Bend Plantation then awakened, and realizing his situation, call for help, being then rescued by Rosa Ray, who, as he knew, had a boat and was an expert with her oars.

This thought, the bare possibility of it, was startling and torturing in the extreme.

Much had been told him by various parties in regard to the Belle of the Brazos, as Rosa was called by even the young ladies with whom she associated and who frequently gathered at Bend Plantation for a day's enjoyment. All loved Rosa Ray, and this scheming villain had often evolved plans in his mind for becoming acquainted with her. He reasoned that as she had never been allowed to mingle with the world she would become an easily won victim, gliding into his net without trouble. In that case he would not be embarrassed in the near future for want of money, as he most assuredly would be did he not form an alliance with a wealthy maiden.

And the very favorable reasons which led him to decide that his course would be all plain sailing in this his plan to gain Rosa Ray, would tend to make sure his success to the same end with Roy Randolph, his hated and dreaded foe, should the latter, as he reasoned was quite possible, come in contact with the Belle of the Brazos. And from the fact that such a meeting, should it occur, would be brought about through his own mad act in setting Roy adrift with such a far different object, Le Grand now became more furious with himself.

He drank an unusual quantity of brandy, and then, as if having formed a sudden resolve, as if an idea had entered his mind which promised to prevent this dreadful marring of his plans, he, with hasty steps, secured his horse, grasped his rifle, and without giving a thought or casting a glance at poor old Dan, who still lay bleeding and senseless near the camp-fire, Louis sprung upon his fiery steed, drove spurs deep and dashed down the Rio Brazos, along a bottom path.

The overhanging branches brushed his face roughly and he at times forced his horse to bound madly through the thickets, rather than make too far a deviation from a direct course, for he reasoned that the boat would probably reach the Bend before he could gain a point on the opposite shore where he could inspect the same, and ascertain if Roy had floated past without being observed. On, at terrific speed, that endangered the limbs of his horse, and his own life at the same time, fired and maddened by liquor and a thirst for revenge, and withal apprehensive that he would be too late; on sped the young planter.

His snake-like and blood-shot eyes glared over the river whenever he could gain a view of the waters; yet he could see nothing of Roy Randolph, whom he had, as he now admitted, most foolishly set adrift.

Not only was it possible, but most probable that Roy would be discovered by some of the slaves working in the river-bottom before night, even should he sleep until then, and not only this, but he had performed the deed after letting his comrades know of his purpose. Then, too, there was old Dan, through whom his cowardly act would become known to the whole neighborhood.

Thus meditated Le Grand, and he berated himself for drinking so heavily, cursing the brandy as the prime cause of his foolish actions, at the same time pouring down more of the poison and resolving that there should be no witnesses in any "crooked" or criminal act of his henceforth.

But everything depended upon Roy's passing the Bend without being observed, for Le Grand well knew that if the young man did pass down the river without discovery, and by some means reach the shore without being swept out upon the Gulf of Mexico, he would refrain from mentioning his adventure. He was one who would wait his own good time to avenge the outrage, the author of which he would without doubt trace out. Unexpectedly to Le Grand, before he had by his calculation gone more than five miles he came to a bayou, which extended north from the river, and which obliged him, much to his annoyance, to make a wide detour. He therefore spurred his horse until the snorting and panting animal was covered, as well as himself, with flecks of foam.

Bitterly he cursed himself for not having extended his hunting trips further down the Brazos, and in that way gained a better knowledge of the windings of the river, but he soon discovered, as he galloped beneath the moss-draped branches of the trees on the verge of the bank below the bayou, a sight that at once re-

lieved his mind and decided him, by a rapid survey of the surroundings, that he was directly opposite Bend Plantation. Not only this, but the Belle of the Brazos was in plain view.

Quickly Le Grand dismounted, secured his horse beyond the possibility of being seen from the opposite bank of the stream, and then rushed to his first position. From this he clambered up into a tree in frantic haste until he reached a point from which he could gain an unobstructed view of the opposite shore.

The first sight that chained his attention was a pleasing one, and one that gave him much relief and pleasure. It was that of a maiden reclining in a hammock, and without doubt in deep slumber, her hair flowing over and below her swinging couch.

At such a distance he could not decide as to the beauty of the damsel, but his imagination from what had been told him assisted him to fill out the picture to his own satisfaction.

A small, fancifully-painted skiff; a boat-landing at the head of the cove; a fawn on the bank near its mistress—all framed in dark green with the drooping moss, and the waters below enhancing the beauties of the vista.

All this at a glance, as has been said, gave him relief and exultation, for he felt assured now that the boat of Roy Randolph had floated past the Bend unperceived. But, as he thus reasoned, another sight met his view. This was a moving object up the river, and approaching him. At a sight of this he clutched the branches in a vise-like grip, ground his clinched teeth together in mad rage, while his black eyes glared with furious hatred, and his swarthy features became fearful in his rage.

Roy Randolph was floating down toward the Bend, still asleep, and the maiden might awake and discover him.

If there should be a dog anywhere in the shrubbery, acting as a guard to the sleeping girl, as was natural, the animal would probably perceive the boat, bark, and awaken her.

If this should occur, Louis Le Grand felt that all his plans would miscarry; that once more his hated enemy would get the better of him, defeat and humiliate him. Terribly agitated, terribly anxious was the watcher in the tree, as the boat floated nearer and nearer to the Bend, and not until it had arrived abreast of the cove directly between himself and the maiden in the hammock, did Le Grand breathe freely. His eyes continued to be fixed upon the occupant of the hanging couch, but he could detect no movement there.

Distance prevented him from seeing the writhing and disturbed state of Rosa Ray, as detailed in a previous chapter.

But at the very moment that Le Grand felt the safest, the fair sleeper sprung up in her hammock, her face being at once turned quickly and directly toward the floating boat, as if her attention had been drawn thither by some powerful magnetic influence.

A pang shot through the frame of Le Grand like a knife-thrust as he saw the movement, and in his furious disappointment and frantic rage he came near falling from his perch. His fury increased almost to madness when he saw the young girl spring from her hammock and into her skiff, shooting like an arrow out upon the waters toward the floating boat, within which reclined the sleeping form of Roy Randolph.

Then it was that the angelic beauty of Rosa Ray became revealed to him, enhanced as it was by the excited expression of her face, the graceful, swan-like bend of her form, and her dexterous handling of the oars. Her long hair floated in the breeze that was caused by her rapid speed, as the little skiff skimmed over the Brazos. All this commanded the fullest admiration of the concealed ruffian, whose baffled rage was increased tenfold by a realization of the worth and loveliness of the prize that he now feared was lost to him forever.

"No!" he hissed between his set teeth, "she is not lost to me! I swear by all the gods that she shall be mine. Roy Randolph shall die by my hand before he becomes intimately acquainted with the Belle of the Brazos. Curse him! I shall wipe him from off the earth and no human eye shall witness the deed. I swear it by all the fiends!"

Clasping his arms tightly about the huge limb, Le Grand watched the scene below him as a panther watches his prey. His eyes were fixed upon Rosa Ray with a burning gaze as she towed the boat with its sleeping occupant to the cove. He saw also the act which awakened the sleeper, and witnessed the scene when Rosa was clasped in his arms.

His rage, however, somewhat subsided, giving room for relief, when he saw the fair girl dart away and speed rapidly homeward. He again thought that there might be hope for him; but he relapsed into his old state as his enemy awoke and rushed after the fleeing girl.

There was certainly no hope now. All his plans might better have not been formed or thought of. His own act in setting Roy adrift had been the means of bringing the latter, his worst and most hated enemy, into companionship with the very maiden whom he had sworn that he would win, conquer, and enslave.

Again Louis Le Grand had recourse to the flask of liquor and once more gazed across the Rio Brazos with a murderous light in his eyes. His second attempt to rid the earth of Roy Randolph had failed; but he again swore that a third should soon be made, and that it should be successful.

CHAPTER VI.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

DURING the time of Roy Randolph's absence in the bottom timber, when the latter bounded in pursuit of the fair Rosa, who had awakened him by the kiss upon his forehead—he having doubtlessly been partially aroused by being drawn into the cool shades of the cove—during this brief absence of his enemy Louis Le Grand suffered all the tortures that can be imagined.

It seemed an age, although in reality but a very short time, before Roy again appeared at the landing, and stood, with folded arms, gazing at his boat in evident perplexity.

Le Grand supposed him to be meditating upon the cause of his late unaccountable position, and striving to solve the mystery of his being afloat, as well as to account for the absence of his oars and rifle. Had he overtaken and conversed with Rosa Ray?

This was now the all-absorbing question in Le Grand's mind, and which he would have given much to have had answered. But there was no means by which he could ascertain it. This fact tortured his brain, and while speculating upon this subject, to the renewed amazement and rage of the watcher, Roy turned around and walked rapidly up the path once more.

What could this mean?

Le Grand wished most sincerely that Captain Ray would come upon the scene and hurl the intruder upon his premises into the Brazos; and, had he dared, he would have fired a revolver fusillade, in hopes that the sound would alarm the people of Bend Plantation, and lead to the discovery of Roy. Unable longer to bear his torturing suspense and uncertainty, Le Grand sprang higher up in the tree; when, to his joy, he caught a view of his detested foe, Roy being now high above the cove, and on the very verge of the bank.

At the same instant, however, a sight caught the eye of the watcher which almost caused him to shriek aloud in his fury, and again to nearly lose his hold.

This was the headlong rush of Rosa Ray around the thicket and into the outstretched arms of Roy Randolph, in which attitude she remained for some time, both of them conversing rapidly.

From this Le Grand was forced to conclude that either these two had met before, or else that they had become so mutually smitten that they threw all the proprieties to the winds. It was evident that Roy had overtaken Rosa, and that they had agreed upon this second meeting; the maiden having merely gone toward the mansion to ascertain if the coast was clear, and that they were in no danger of being discovered.

Again Le Grand had recourse to his flask, while a murderous light lurked in his eye.

He began to perceive that matters had gone beyond all bounds, and that there must be an immediate stop put to all these proceedings, or he should become insane with rage and jealousy. At the first glance he had of Rosa's face and form, as she bent at her oars, all the passion that his black heart was capable of entertaining went out to her.

Previously he had sworn that he would win her, drawn to that oath by her reputed beauty, her exclusiveness, and her great wealth; but now he vowed that he would wade in gore, move heaven and earth, to gain her as his own. His she should be, though all the fiends stood between him and her.

Thus he resolved and made oath, his lips foaming, his teeth grating, and he trembling with murderous fury. And when Le Grand was in this condition, it was, that he saw Roy Randolph run down the bank to the landing, grasp the oars from the skiff of Rosa, spring into his own boat, and with vigorous strokes shoot out of the cove and up the river.

Then it was that Louis Le Grand, with the look of an exultant fiend, descended the tree, hastened to his horse, sprang into the saddle and spurred through the now dark shades of the timber, in such a course as to pass around the head of the bayou and thence on up the Brazos, aiming to strike the same half way between Bend Plantation and the point where he had set Roy Randolph adrift.

The sun had sunk below the horizon, and although a bright full moon rode high in the heavens, it was quite dark beneath the bottom timber, where, on his foam-flecked steed, Louis Le Grand glided silently, like a demon of the night, along a cattle-path, leaving his horse to its own guidance as the animal was proceeding in the direction of its home.

On until the rider knew that a sweep of the river would be illumined by the moon, while the undergrowth on its banks would be as dark as Erebus, from the more luxuriant trees that grew on the rich water-side, and that were bur-

dened with vines and moss, which clung to the very tops of the dense undergrowth.

Leaving his horse at a distance which would prevent a snort or neigh from being heard from the river, the miscreant grasped his rifle and stole cautiously toward the Rio Brazos.

On he went, half-bent, darting glances suspiciously around, his coward heart being apprehensive of there being other lurkers in the bottom, although this was unlikely; in fact, he well knew that it was very doubtful if there was a human being within hearing of a shot from his rifle, except his intended victim. Yet his comrades, who had deserted him, might, for all he knew, be still in the vicinity. Thus on glided the murder-bent villain, intent, resolved, indeed, that he would assassinate one whom he knew to be far his superior in everything that makes man noble, honest and humane.

At times he would start like the guilty thing that he was, as some bird flapped its wings above his head, or a small animal shot through the bush in affright at his approach, at such times clutching his rifle in desperation, and then giving vent to a low, hoarse and unnatural laugh at his absurd timidity.

At length he cocked his rifle, the snap of the lock shooting through his nerves like an electric stroke.

When the spring flew back in its place would it be the signal of death to his hated foe?

Louis Le Grand had little doubt in this respect, for he was a crack shot.

Once before, however, he recalled the fact that he had missed the same man's heart at fifteen paces, and he now cursed himself for trembling, and for entertaining any doubtful thoughts.

His bullet must enter a vital part, or he would be a felon, an assassin, before the world; for, did Roy Randolph recover, he would move heaven and earth to trace out the man who had attempted his life.

More cautiously, as he neared the river, the ruffian proceeded, feeling his way more than seeing it, as the arrows of moonlight that shot down here and there served not to lighten his path to any extent.

Soon he heard the ripple of the river and saw the silvery sheen upon the broad waters, and far below his covert where that sheen was broken, the boat of Roy Randolph plowing through the water, causing long and sweeping ripples to extend on either side, as the vigorous stroke of the rower shot the little craft forward on its way—forward toward the covert of the assassin, forward toward death!

Why do not the fragile oars snap in twain? Why are they not, belonging as they do to Rosa Ray, instilled with something of her love for him who grasps them, and sufficient knowledge of the danger that lurks beneath, to warn him of his peril? Where is thy guardian angel, Roy Randolph? Let us hope and pray that some such being hovers over the assassin's head, awaiting the proper moment to draw the tips of her wings across his eyes, and thus destroy his aim!

On sped the little boat; Roy's head uncovered, his wavy brown hair hanging to his broad shoulders, his sinewy arms working with the regularity of a machine; his mind, heretofore filled with thoughts of Rosa Ray, now turning to dwell upon the outrage, which, although it had proved to him a blessing, was nevertheless a most cowardly deed.

Thus on, skimming over the silvery sheen, corrugated by the current, glided Roy Randolph; his mind busy in concocting plans to expose the perfidy, the cowardly character of the very man who now crouched within the undergrowth he was nearing, bent upon his murder.

Had he turned about in his seat, Roy might have seen the glint of the moon on a rifle barrel which the assassin was obliged to thrust out from the screen of foliage; the direction in which the weapon was pointed proving that the lurking dastard did not intend to wait until his victim had reached a point directly abreast of him, but would shoot him before even his profile became outlined to him.

But Roy Randolph turned not. His eyes were fastened down the Brazos, toward Bend Plantation; although his thoughts were of the man who had sent him adrift.

At last the rifle of the assassin was thrust further outward, the fiendish face of Louis Le Grand appearing from among the bushes, and a murderous glare in the eye that glanced along the deadly tube.

Only for an instant thus. Then the night-wrapped solitudes rung with the sharp crack of the rifle; the report echoing startlingly up and down the river, amid the natural arches of the timber.

A puff of smoke, slowly rising, betrayed the spot where the dastard had been when he fired; but no human eye was there to see the tell-tale vapor.

No sooner did Le Grand pull trigger than he jerked in his rifle and sprung erect, peering toward the boat. His face was frightful in expression, but his form was trembling from head to foot, as he looked in the direction of his victim. He saw him spring up, and then forward; partially turning about as if, when death had

stricken him, he was resolved to gain a view of his murderer.

Then he fell backward, almost burying the prow of the boat beneath the waters; the oars falling from his grasp, as he lay prone and senseless, and apparently dead. His head rested on the forward triangular seat, in the same position that he had occupied when, as he lay asleep, he had been sent floating down the river.

Now the boat shot again forward, impelled by its momentum, and the fall of its owner but a moment; it then came to a stop and slowly glided sternways with the current, soon being forced around, and pointing down the river. As it whirled in the waters, Le Grand distinctly saw the face of his victim; his own features becoming ghastly, and his form quivering, while cold chills ran through his frame to the very marrow in his bones.

Down the handsome face of Roy Randolph, now plainly lit up by the moon, ran little streams of blood, and between these streams the skin was as white as that of a corpse.

Le Grand strove to make an outcry, to relieve his overburdened brain, but naught except a gurgling sound escaped his lips; and, jerking his flask from his hunting-shirt he glued the nozzle to his lips, and drank enough to madden any one who was unaccustomed to such indulgence.

He was a murderer, an assassin; and already, he imagined the deadly rope about his neck.

He gazed out from his covert again; his eyes now wild and staring unnaturally.

Roy Randolph was gliding down the Brazos again; this time, in the night, when discovery was next to impossible—this time, in the chains of a sleep that knows no waking!

Down the rapid current, the corpse must glide, through dark shadows and silvery sheen—on, and still on, until embraced and swallowed up by the raging waters of the Mexique Gulf!

Louis Le Grand felt that at last, revenge was his own; but it gave him no relief. Just the opposite; for fiends seemed to laugh and hiss, and jeer and howl from the dark shades. Strange sounds were in his ears; and, hurling his rifle into the river, he darted toward the spot where he had left his horse, tearing through the undergrowth as though the avenger of blood was on his track.

Springing upon his snorting steed, the beast affrighted at his headlong approach, the assassin drove deep his spurs, throwing the reins over the horn of his saddle, and caring little which way he went, provided it was only away from the scene of his crime, and from the corpse of his victim!

CHAPTER VII.

COMES HE IN DEATH.

NEVER before had Rosa Ray been troubled with thoughts that banished sleep. Never before had she left the house to walk the garden-paths in the still night. But now she felt no fear, even after she had entered the dark shades of the bottom timber; the torturing anxiety, that had taken possession of her on account of Roy, crowding every other feeling into the background.

She knew that he must be yet on the river, that he could not yet have reached a favorable point in the same, from which he could walk or ride to his home; which was fully thirty miles away, as she had more than once heard from her father.

His course was up the river, against the current; and must, in consequence, be slow and tedious.

Thus the young girl reasoned, as she walked briskly toward the landing; the huge watchdog walking behind her—the animal, as they passed the moonlit garden paths, gazing up into her face, in mingled wonder and affection, rubbing his large head at times against her hand, as if craving a caress, and filled with pleasure at being permitted to accompany her.

As a matter of course, Rosa had no idea that she should see or hear aught of Roy; but she felt that her mind would be more composed by a walk in the open air, and that to pass over the ground he had trod, to stand upon the same sward that his feet had pressed, would be happiness in itself. She thought over and over again, when she paused at length, and gazed into her little skiff, satisfying herself that her oars had been taken, that the strange experiences through which she had passed since awakening in her hammock, were real, and not a mere dream, or the imaginings of a disordered brain. Her head was hot and feverish, her cheeks flushed and burning, and the cool air of the bottom timber, relieved by a glance upon the rolling river, was most refreshing.

The scene was very beautiful, and the maiden vowed that this would not be the last walk of the kind she would take to the boat landing.

It was well worth sitting up half of the night, to gaze over the silvery sheen, the dark, somber background of timber, and the dense undergrowth; and to listen to the soothing music of the waters, as they rippled through the reeds.

Gazing upward, Rosa was greatly surprised,

indeed astonished; for, from the position of the moon, she knew that but a short space of time had expired since she had gone to her chamber soon after tea, for she had then looked up at the Queen of Night from her window.

It had, however, seemed to her, that morning must be near at hand; the state of her mind causing but a few minutes to seem an hour.

She knew that the household had retired but a little time ago, and she was troubled much when that fact occurred to her; for she had frequently heard her father assert that many nights he had lain for hours before he could compose himself to sleep. Especially was this apt to be the case after he had been riding over the plantation, which she knew to have been the case the day just past.

What could she say in explanation of her being at the landing at such a time, should her father arise, and seek the veranda to enjoy his pipe, when he would discover that Hero, the watch-dog, was not at his post?

In the event of such a thing happening, Rosa well knew that her father would become quite excited about the absence of the dog, and proceed at once to investigate it.

Although the strange occurrences of the previous afternoon had been most vividly impressed upon the young girl's mind, and she knew them to be real in every detail, yet she felt relieved when she discovered that her oars had been taken.

Then she fell to pondering as to whether Roy had departed immediately upon taking leave of her, or had he possibly lingered in the shades for a time, to think over his adventure. And now it seemed strange to her again that he had not explained to her how it had happened that he was afloat in such a helpless condition.

Then again she thought of the probability of her father arising from his bed for a smoke; and she turned about to hasten up the path and to her home, seeing now how foolish she had been to leave it.

At this moment, however, a low growl, followed by long-drawn, whining sighs, came from Hero, and Rosa glanced behind her in fright and apprehension, for she well knew that the dog had scented something strange, and that had puzzled him.

She was obliged to step back and to bend over the dog to ascertain at what point the animal's attention was attracted, for they were beneath the dense foliage where the moonlight did not penetrate. She perceived that he was scenting something just beyond the point where the waters swept into view around the Bend to the west.

Springing quickly erect, our heroine swept the moonlit waters from directly abreast the landing, up and around to the timber line; but there was naught that broke the silvery surface except the natural rippling of the current. Rosa was about to turn and chide the dog when a moving object caught her view, seeming to shoot out from the dark shades over the moonlit waters; and the next instant she staggered backward, trembling as if stricken with palsy, and clutching a sapling for support.

Then she drew her hand across her eyes and brow, her breath coming in short, quick gasps, her eyes shining unnaturally and filled with superstitious horror; while from her lips, in a hoarse whisper, struggled the words:

"Oh, my God—my God!"

There before her, gliding over the silvery sheen of waters, noiselessly, and exactly as she had seen it when she awakened in her hammock—there, in mid-channel, was the self-same boat; and reclining in the same position that Roy had occupied was a human form, whose face she could not yet discern, but who she felt was the same man, Roy Randolph.

"My God—my God!"

Again came the words, in a strange and unnatural voice. The poor girl was dumfounded; her brain was tortured by a terrible and superstitious dread; and no wonder was it that she was thus affected. On swept the boat, the contour of the man's head becoming clearly visible, and the long, wavy hair preparing Rosa for the soon-to-be-revealed face.

The branches of the sapling quivered above the head of the appalled maiden, and it was a wonder that she retained her senses; perhaps she would not but for a reaction occasioned by Hero, who stretched his neck, his muzzle in the air, and gave vent to a low howl, which would have been loudly given had not his mistress, by a herculean effort, summoned strength to caution the brute by word and pat of the hand.

A moment more and slowly the boat swung around the opposite landing, revealing the face of the outstretched occupant; that face turned directly toward her, the eyes wide open, fixed and glaring in the moonlight, from out a network of little streams and splashes of blood.

It was a horrible sight. That boat slowly gliding over the placid waters, with a flood of moonlight which revealed but too vividly, in all its ghastly details, the seeming corpse of Roy Randolph.

When the face was clearly seen by Rosa Ray, she sprung forward, both hands pressed upon her throbbing temples, her face pallid as death, her form trembling, and her features, in their

look of anguish and despair, scarcely recognizable.

This was only for a moment. Then, as she realized that the boat was gliding from her, bearing away forever the corpse of the one and only man who had ever caused her heart to overflow with a flood of uncontrollable love—one who had, as she believed, been wafted to her on the tide to prove to her that she had not known herself, that it was in the power of human beings to enjoy an ecstatic, most heavenly love this side of the grave—as Rosa realized this, recalling the severed rope and the fiendish face that she had seen watching them from beyond the river, she sprang, with a half-stifled cry, that was a mingled moan and shriek, to her boat, tore loose the fastenings, and pointed the prow toward mid-channel, but in a quartering course down-stream.

With all her heavy load of anguish and horror, which almost crushed the poor girl into insensibility, her brain seeming about to burst from its casement of bone—with all this, the maiden recalled the fact that Roy had taken her oars, and acted accordingly.

Standing erect for a moment, she closed her eyes, raised her clasped hands heavenward, and cried out, in prayerful, most earnest supplication:

"Oh, Father in heaven! give me strength in this hour of despair and horror! Look down upon and pity Thy stricken child!"

The girl felt stronger. She quickly drew the stern of the boat close to the platform, and then with all her power shot the skiff forward, springing into it in such a manner as to give it more momentum. Then she stood gazing toward the corpse-laden craft ahead, stood as rigid and motionless as if carved from stone, and noticing not, as she bounded into her boat, that Hero shot through the air at the same instant, landing in the skiff at the same time that she did, but behind her.

Out into the moonlight darted the little boat, the black dog standing on the stern seat, the pale and ghastly maiden in the middle of the craft, the current striking and acting first upon the prow, turning her down the river in a course that would, should a very slight propelling power be used, bring the boats near to each other, gliding in parallel courses.

It was a strange, most impressive and mysteriously weird scene, the moonlight lending an unearthly appearance to the view.

But the slow-moving tableau soon changed, for our heroine, rendered most desperate by the dread and torturing anxiety and anguish, wrenched one of the thwarts from its place, and paddled first to one side and then to the other, seeming to be endowed suddenly with great strength and electric-like motion.

Nearer and nearer the frail skiff approached the drifting boat, that, with the blood-stained and apparently dead body of its owner, glided toward the Mexican Gulf, until at last but a yard intervened. One more favorable and vigorous stroke gave the desperate girl, and then, with a shriek like the despairing cry of a lost soul, she sprang from her skiff into the boat, her movements causing the former to lose headway and the latter to dart onward with increased velocity.

But no sooner did Rosa reach the boat than her brain reeled, her overstrained nerves relaxed and she fell forward, limp and senseless upon the body of Roy Randolph, her head resting upon his still breast, her face, like his, turned in such a manner as to allow the moon's rays to illumine it, showing the ghastly angelic features of the maiden and the blood-stained face of her lover—one arm of the latter trailing in the water, as did the wild flowing tresses of Rose Ray.

And just astern, followed the skiff, Hero standing with his fore paws on the forward seat, his weird and long-drawn howls sounding on the night air at frequent intervals, with an intonation that was almost human in its expression of anguish and deep grief.

Thus on glided the two boats, funeral-like and strange, the corpses uncoffined, and the only mourner a faithful dog, whose howl expressed more regret, sorrow, and suffering than many human beings manifest at the demise of their best-loved friends and relatives.

Down the silvery bosom of the Rio Brazos they glided through the night, in a flood of silvery moonlight; the howl of the faithful dog sounding, requiem-like, over the still waters.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

As has been mentioned, Louis Le Grand sped away from the scene of his most dastardly crime as fast as the nature of the ground would permit; indeed he could not have proceeded more rapidly, had there been a hundred Comanche warriors behind him in swift pursuit, and howling for his blood.

The dark thickets seemed peopled with hideous fiends, ready to bound from their coverts, and clutch their claw-like fingers about his throat. He soon gained a more open section of the bottom-land, where patches, bars, and arrows of moonlight added to the weirdness of the scene; but this served to guide him in his

headlong flight from the point where he had shot at Roy Randolph, and shot to kill.

The rush of 'coons and opossums through the bushes to gain their perches in some favorite tree, frightened by the bounding and snorting steed, seemed to the murderer to be huge serpents, squirming into coils, preparatory to springing upon him, and crushing out his life in their loathsome folds.

The weird hoot of the owls overhead seemed like the ominous and exultant howl of demons about to hurl themselves from the shades above upon him; the swish and whirl of startled birds, he thought, were like the taunting whispers of fiends, who only wished to torture him by delaying the moment when they should pounce upon him, and fly with the speed of the wind, and their hot breath upon his cheeks, to the regions of torment.

His form cowered, bowed closely to his steed, cringing to the right and to the left, as thus alarmed; his swarthy face became ghastly in its hue, his black, horror-stricken eyes shooting glances of fear and apprehension on all sides.

At times he would see the boat of his victim gliding over the bushes, or high in the branches, Roy Randolph, with his arms thrown up, and his bleeding face half-turned, striving to catch, while the mark of death was upon him, a glance of his cowardly murderer, as he fell forward in the boat.

Then the vision would melt away, the long festoons of Spanish moss, slowly swaying, seemed to be the funeral palls that marked the dissolution and burial forever, from the sight of man, of poor Roy Randolph.

Again the same waving moss decorations of the wild wood would appear to Le Grand's disordered brain to be the ghosts of murdered men; who, led by the avenging spirit of Roy, were now searching the earth for their slayers, seeking to avenge their own violent death.

Quick following each other panorama-like, appeared these scenes and frights, and Le Grand's teeth chattered, his strength left him, and he cowered in abject terror, clinging in desperation to his saddle-horse. In this way, the miscreant allowed his horse free rein, for his terror had driven every thing else from his mind, and he knew not in what direction he was speeding.

At length, however, he recognized a lightning-riven tree, as being near to the camping-place where he and his companions had halted in their hunt, and where he had discovered and set Roy Randolph adrift; an act which, he now knew, had been the direct means of bringing Roy and Rosa together, and through his ungovernable jealousy and thirst for revenge, thrusting his own neck into the noose.

He felt that, from the moment his eyes first fell upon the form of Roy, as he lay asleep in his boat at the cove—from that moment fortune had deserted him, and the evil Fates had marked him for their own. He knew that the devil had a heavy mortgage upon him, which was liable to be foreclosed at any moment. But for all that, the dastardly wretch did not believe that he could be made to suffer any greater torments than he now endured.

But he was doomed to realize very soon, that his cup of bitter regret and self-condemnation—that the torture he had suffered since his coward shot, could be increased, as will be shown presently.

On, past the shattered tree, bounded the black horse, and its black-hearted rider, each intensely eager to join their kind; the horse scenting the two animals that had been left in the camp, and pointing directly for the same, the rider recalling his inhuman treatment of his slave, but nevertheless insanely eager, in his fright and horror, to be with, and converse with any human being—even poor old black Dan.

Crashing through the undergrowth, the horse, panting and quivering in every muscle, bounded directly into the clear space beneath the bottom timber, which was comparatively well lighted by the moon.

The animal sprang to the middle of the camp, and then came to a sudden halt; so sudden, that its terrified rider was hurled violently to the earth. There he lay motionless, devoid of all sense; the horse, with a wild and terrified snort, plunging toward the pack-mule and the horse of old Dan, both of which were lariatied amid the wild rye, just clear of the camp.

The fire had long since gone out, and Le Grand had been thrown directly over the ashes of the same, and upon the hard-tramped ground.

He had been insanely eager to meet some human being; even the company of his old slave, under the circumstances, would be a great satisfaction. It would relieve him, partially at least, from the dread terrors he was now experiencing; and his wish was now gratified, although he knew it not. For he lay beside old Dan, his face within a few inches of that of his slave—the slave, whom he had stricken to the earth, in such a cowardly manner, for failing to inform him that he had discovered Roy Randolph asleep in his boat in the cove.

However, had Louis Le Grand not been bereft of consciousness, the dread terror and fearful fright that tortured him would have been doubled, instead of being decreased, by joining his slave; for the face of the latter was of ashen

hue, and smeared with gore, as was also his gray wool.

The eyes that had oft been filled with apprehension and terror, as the curses of his master met his ear, were wide open, staring, and fixed upon that master's silent, senseless form—that form so near his own—but those eyes were sightless and soulless now!

The aged slave's bondage was over; his spirit had gone back to its God!

Poor, faithful old Dan was dead.

And there, beneath the towering trees of the Brazos, lay master and servant, side by side; a bar of moonlight playing upon the murdered old man, whose hard, worn hands were now done with toil, whose spirit was at last at rest—at rest, and forever!

The slave dead, and his master lying insensible by his side; the latter doomed henceforth to living torture and misery, the former murdered by him, and most foully and brutally.

Two murders, Louis Le Grand, in one night!

Insensibility is indeed a most merciful state for you to be plunged into; but it is only a brief respite. Such human fiends are seldom favored to the extent of long-delayed punishment.

The mills of the gods grind not slowly for such as you, Louis Le Grand; for Justice and Retribution regulate the whirl of the stones at times, thank Heaven!

Over the prostrate forms of master and slave slowly swayed the ghastly gray festoons of moss, casting slowly-moving shadows on many a patch of moonlight in the weird opening.

Beyond the camp could be heard the animals, as they grazed upon the wild rye, and the vicious stamp of their hoofs and swish of their tails, as they sought to free themselves from the torturing flies.

To the south the musical ripple of the waters of the Brazos through the reeds along shore, was broken in upon by the harsh, deep croak of huge frogs, and the buzzing of myriads of insects of the night.

Above was the hooting of the owls, and in the distance the occasional short and sharp barks of the cowardly coyotes.

These were the only sounds that broke in upon the solemn stillness of the night; naught was there to indicate that any human beings were near.

And thus the scene remained for some time, as has been faintly described; but finally a deep groan issued from the lips of Louis Le Grand, yet not a movement of his form was discernible.

The groan was followed by a low growl from the dark shades up the river, and near the bank of the same; and a moment after a huge black bear waddled into the camp, its white teeth gleaming, its long red tongue lolling, and its eyes blazing, for the beast had scented man and blood.

As the bear approached the two men who lay outstretched, he thrust his muzzle upward, snuffing the air, and then approached more cautiously, first reaching the corpse of old Dan, over which it smelled, being evidently enraged because no movement was perceptible.

The beast growled fiercely, stepped over the body of the negro, and dragged its tongue over, and thrust its cold nose into the face of Le Grand, who was about recovering consciousness.

The latter opened his eyes in the utmost bewilderment, evidently at a loss to know where he was, what had brought him there, or how to account for the state he was in.

One look, however, caused him to realize that he was in danger of being torn in pieces and devoured, this most appalling peril leaving him no time to recall the near past, or to collect his bewildered mind.

He knew, however, that he had been insensible. But he knew that his life now hung upon a hair, and that only by the most lightning-like movements could he hope to escape, situated as he was. Gathering, therefore, all his strength, and bringing his muscles into instantaneous action, he rolled over and over, away from the terrible brute, and then sprang to his feet, bounding to a low-branched tree that was near at hand. Up this he clambered, the huge bear, with fierce, mad growls at his heels, and he just escaping the horrible jaws.

Not until he was up the tree did Le Grand perceive that the trunk of the same was at least three feet in diameter, and easily climbed by the bear, but upon quickly thrusting his hand to his belt he found that his revolver was there, and he felt that he was saved.

Quickly he jerked the weapon, and none too soon, for the wide open jaws, the red and repulsive tongue, and the fiery eyes appeared immediately below his perch, he being unable, through weakness, to proceed further up the tree after his one Herculean effort.

Thrusting the barrel of his "Colt" into the open jaws, Le Grand pulled the trigger, and, with a horrible howl, the claws of the bear gave way. The brute fell to the earth, where it lay in the contortions of death.

The report of the revolver on the night air was simply terrific, ringing through the tim-

ber, and this brought at once to the mind of Le Grand the shot that he had so recently fired at Roy Randolph, and the horrors that had since then tortured him.

Springing to the ground he drove his bowie deep into the vitals of the bear, and then gazed about the camp, but he started backward, as if the gates of hell had opened before him, as the form of old Dan met his view.

There he stood, chained to the spot, his form rigid and his eyes bulging in horror.

Soon, however, he sunk to the earth, and crawled upon his hands and knees until he was near the body of his ever faithful slave.

Extending his hand he laid it on the face of old Dan, but quickly withdrew it, his blood chilling with dread horror.

Then, with a yell of terror and remorse, Le Grand bounded to the patch of wild rye, where his horse was feeding, and was soon in the saddle. Driving spurs, the terrified wretch dashed away immediately on the back trail down the Brazos, gazing over his shoulder, with bated breath, as he galloped madly away from the scene of blood and horror.

CHAPTER IX.

SAVED A SECOND TIME.

ON down the Rio Brazos, now passing over the moonlit, silvery surface, and anon over shaded, inky depths; the towering trees, as the river wound outward in a more direct course, shading the entire surface—on floated the boat of Roy Randolph, so strangely laden.

And close behind, gaining slowly from being less freighted and sharper in build, followed the little craft of Rosa Ray; Hero, the faithful watch-dog, still positioned as has been described, his fore-feet on the forward portion of the boat, his head outstretched, and his long-drawn mournful howlings breaking at intervals on the night—sounds that seemed ominous of death.

The eyes of the faithful brute were fixed upon the prostrate form of his mistress, and at times he would gather his strength, as if to make a bound over the space that separated the boats. Then, with a whining cry, he would abandon the attempt; but, seeming to realize that the space was narrowing all the time, and that the boat he was in was gaining on the other.

Thus on, until the two boats shot into a moonlit stretch of waters; a bayou being on the left, or northerly side of the stream.

And here it was that the intelligent animal gave a fierce growl, changing his weight from one foot to another and gazing toward the mouth of the bayou, which the boats were now approaching, his eyes fixed upon a black and stump-like object, which seemed to be floating upon the waters.

This could not be the case, however, for the dark object was quivering through the current and not floating with the same—quivering in such a manner as to intercept the boats.

Snuffing the air, Hero, well used to seeing the amphibious denizens of the rivers and bayous, knew well that a huge alligator was approaching and that the presence of the monster threatened danger to his young mistress. Hence the menacing growl of the dog.

Nearer and nearer the hideous slimy head of the monster approached, and nearer to the leading boat glided the skiff; Hero, showing signs of intense fury, crouching to spring forward, but resuming his former position, with that whining cry, knowing that he could not clear the gap between the boats.

As has been mentioned, the arm of Roy hung over the side of the boat and into the water, as did the hair of Rosa; the weight of the two causing the forward end of the boat to sink deep into the waters. This fact seemed to be noticed by Hero, who apparently by his actions knew that the alligator could easily clutch his mistress in its huge jaws, drag her into the dark depths and devour her.

Nearer and yet nearer, glided the huge lizard, until the dog could see its glittering eyes; until only ten feet parted it from the forward end of the leading boat, the limp arm of Roy gliding through the water, seeming to have attracted its attention.

More and more excited grew Hero. Every muscle in his body quivering, while he jumped frantically about, and gave constantly that agonizing, whining cry. At length, as the alligator was within two feet of Roy's arm, the whine changed to a fierce growl, as the dog shot over the intervening space and landed safely on the stern of the leading boat.

Not an instant, however, did he remain there, for, gathering his muscles with the rapidity of lightning, and with a growl of fierce fury, he again shot through the air—this time overboard—directly at the head of the alligator, and not twelve inches from Roy's arm. At that moment the immense jaws had opened for the fatal snap of the terrible teeth.

Remarkably well calculated was the leap of Hero, for he landed in the water in such a position as to enable him to close his fangs upon the tender lip of the monster, and this in such a manner that the quick-following, spiteful snap

of the saurian's jaws did not close upon the dog's nose.

The same instant both Hero and the head of the alligator disappeared beneath the surface, the huge monster's tail thrashing the waters for a full minute into foam, and throwing high a silvery spray, which descended in a shower upon Roy and Rosa.

A moment after, the dog appeared above the surface, and, plunging forward with the current, placed its paws upon the side of the boat where it was nearest to the surface, being the point where Roy's arm hung over, and then clambered up, while the water poured profusely from his body.

The shower caused by the alligator had served to partially restore Rosa to consciousness, and Hero's liberal scattering of the water caused the poor girl to spring partly upward, the dog shaking himself vigorously at the same time. This third shower-bath not only fully restored our heroine, but caused a groan to issue from the lips of Roy Randolph—the sweetest music that the maiden had ever heard—causing her to cry out, in heartfelt tones:

"I thank Thee! Oh, Father in Heaven, I thank Thee!"

As Rosa thus exclaimed, her attention was drawn to the actions of the dog, the poor brute having refrained from expressing his intense joy at the recovery of his mistress, and preparing for another bound into the water.

Guided by the gaze of the animal, Rosa, to her horror, discovered the alligator, the monster having again come to the surface, and was now approaching the boat with furious speed.

Giving vent to her terror by a shriek, the young girl pulled the arm of Roy from the water, jerked the bowie-knife from his belt, and, gathering strength, drove the blade directly into an eye of the beast. The huge saurian thrashed the waters for a few moments, and then disappeared amid a shower of spray, the commotion, with the act of Rosa, coming near swamping the boat.

Hero meanwhile filled the air with frantic growls, and it was at this time that Roy's lids quivered, his eyes slowly opened, and the strange scene was revealed to him. But, at the moment, he recollected nothing of the near past, or of his condition.

The face of the young girl expressed the various emotions that swayed her; but as she again saw the soul light in the eyes of him whom she had once believed to be dead, she fell forward, clasping her arms about the young man's head.

Soon recovering herself, she poured water over his face, washing away the blood, which saturated his hair and partly blinded his eyes. She continued her labor of love, while Hero stood beside her, wagging his tail and showing the strongest manifestations of relief and joy, although at times he shot glances on all sides of the boat, in a suspicious manner.

Roy spoke not a word, but as he seemed gradually to arrive at a realization of the condition of affairs, although seeming dumfounded and mystified, he raised his arms, clasped them about our heroine, and drew her gently upon his breast. His eyes were filled with a tender love, all else except the present moment seeming to have been banished from his mind.

"Oh, Roy, thank God you live! Thank God! Thank God!"

These words came from Rosa with a prayerful pathos—a loving sweetness—in a low, almost whispered voice, as the poor girl clung to Roy, with a strange, wild light in her gaze—a feeling of intense relief, joy and thankfulness expressed—and yet a terrible apprehension, dread concern and agony shown in her features.

Suddenly she released herself and sprang upward and backward upon the middle thwart, covering her face with her hands, her head bent forward, her hair veiling her form, while her frame shook and trembled with the strongest emotion. This continued for some minutes, Roy meanwhile striving with all his power to fathom this latest mystery; to account for, not only his present condition and his position on the river, but also for the presence of Rosa Ray whose face recalled at this time only the interviews he had had with her at the Bend.

His muscles seemed to have lost all power, and his frame to be as lead, incapable of motion. His brain, however, seemed to recover more readily than his powers of motion, and the sight of Rosa, apparently in great distress, served to arouse him, especially when she suddenly raised her head, swept back the long hair from her pale face and cried out in a voice that was most agonizing to hear:

"Oh, Roy, what has occurred? Who was it that shot you, and for what? Oh, what a night this has been! May I never have to go through such another. Oh, what shall we do? What shall we do? What will my father think? He will go mad with grief!"

These words were spoken quickly and pleadingly, while her voice and manner were more childlike than ever, as if her only hope, her very life depended upon Roy Randolph.

By a great effort the latter now threw off the lethargy and benumbing feelings that oppressed him, and sprang to a sitting posture; his gaze

sweeping the surrounding banks of the river, then glancing at the dog, and lastly being fastened upon Rosa, whose form all this time concealed the little skiff in the rear from view.

Then he spoke, but his voice sounded strangely:

"Rosa Ray, I beg of you to explain this most perplexing mystery. In Heaven's name, how happened you and that dog in my boat, and where are we?"

"Why are we on the river together at night? For God's sake—for your own sake and mine, tell me what it all means?"

"Oh, Roy, do for my sake endeavor to get to the bank or I am lost. There is a seat in my skiff astern which I wrenched from its place in order to paddle to your assistance. Oh, do think of the position I am in!"

"If I do not reach the Bend before morning, I am lost, lost, lost! I have risked my life and everything for you, Ray Randolph, and oh, for the love of mercy and justice, try and gain the south bank ere it is too late! I will explain all."

The agonized and pleading manner of the maiden was irresistible; and although still more astounded by the boat of Rosa being just astern—which fact, however, in a moment after served to account to him for her presence on the river—Roy quickly secured the same, made it fast to his own, grasped the loose thwart, and without a word, bent himself to the task of paddling toward the south bank—Rose sitting in the stern of the boat, and Hero lying at her feet.

It was no slight undertaking, but at length he gained a cove up which he forced the boat. He then secured both it and the little skiff in a sheltered nook and clasping Rosa in his arms, toiled up through the bushes and timber. Not until clear of the same did he place the young girl upon her feet. The faithful dog, Hero, kept close by his side throughout.

During this time the young man's brain had been busy, and he had recalled all his experiences of the previous evening up to the time of his being struck senseless while rowing up the river, and he knew that he had been shot, by feeling the track of the bullet along his skull.

Taking the hand of Rosa, the latter now seeming to have become hopeful and more like her own sweet self, Roy led her up the river bank on the verge of the timber, each for a brief moment gazing into the eyes of the other, the young man satisfied that again he was indebted to the fair girl at his side for the greatest self-sacrifice and heroic daring.

"Now, Rosa Ray," he said, with deep feeling, and with no little curiosity, "do, please, explain your presence on the river! I have reasoned out the cause of my being there myself, and the cause of my condition. Some one shot me, it is evident, and shot to kill, while I was rowing up-stream, and at quite a considerable distance from the Bend.

"I do not know who the cowardly assassin was, but I have my suspicions. There is but one man on the Rio Brazos who has any motive in seeking my life, and that motive is revenge—revenge caused by my having publicly humiliated him as he deserved. He it was, I am sure, who first sent me adrift when I was asleep in my boat in a cove, fatigued after a long row, and from being last night on a fire-hunt."

"Explain, Rosa, I beg of you, your presence on the river to-night!"

Our heroine hesitated for a moment, as she did not wish to confess that, from thinking of the man at her side, she had been unable to sleep, and this she decided to omit, or at least to mention in such a manner that it would not reveal her sentiments to an unmaidenly extent.

"Oh, Roy!" she said, in deep emotion, "I will tell you all in a very few words. I retired at my usual hour, but the excitement of the evening kept me awake. I arose, dressed and, unknown to all at home, walked down to the landing. Hero, my dear faithful old dog, accompanied me. I thought that a walk in the open air would compose me, and that upon my return to the house I could sleep."

"Roy Randolph, I have not been back since, and if we do not reach the Bend before morning, I tell you again, I am lost! I am not exaggerating when I say this. Father will never forgive me for what I have done. If they have discovered my absence, oh! what shall I do?"

As she said this Rosa Ray burst into a fit of hysterical weeping.

CHAPTER X.

SAFE AT HOME.

"Do, for your own sake, compose yourself!" pleaded Roy, as the young girl began to sob. "Please dry your eyes, and tell me, if you can judge by any landmarks, the distance we have floated. Do not tax yourself with further explanations; for I can easily account, I think, for everything from what you have told me."

By a powerful effort of the will, the maiden controlled herself, and dried her eyes. She then looked around her for a moment, suddenly exclaiming, with a tone of deep relief in her voice:

"Oh, Roy! Thank Heaven we are not far from the Bend! We cannot be more than a mile, I am sure. If we leave the timber here,

and go direct across the plain, we can strike the stream just below the Bend; for the Brazos makes an eastern sweep, from our home to this point.

"Oh, if we can but reach there before my absence is discovered! I feel some hope now, and I will continue what I was saying. As I told you, I walked to the landing, saw that you had taken my oars, and was about to return, when Hero began to growl. I saw that his attention was attracted up the river.

"I looked in that direction, and you may imagine my astonishment, when I perceived your boat, floating down in the same manner as I previously had seen it, when in my hammock. I could see you, too, lying in the same position as when you glided down asleep.

"I was startled, terrified; it was so strange and unaccountable. Then, when I recognized your face in the moonlight, all stained with blood, I was horror-stricken, for I thought you were dead. Without thinking of anything else, I gave my skiff a violent push, sprung into it, and went in pursuit. Hero bounded in at the same time, I suppose, though I did not notice him.

"I succeeded in overtaking you, got into your boat, and then lost all consciousness. When I recovered, Hero stood near me, dripping with water; and I was, as well as yourself, completely spattered. This, I knew, had been done by the dog; and he was about to dive into the river again, when I discovered an immense alligator about to seize your arm, which hung into the water.

"I caught up your knife, and thrust it into the monster's eye; but I know that Hero must have saved your life and mine too, by springing upon the alligator, on its first approach.

"Now you know all, Roy, except that I entertained fears for your safety, after you had left the Bend; what made me apprehend anything, was from observing that the painter of your boat had been severed by a knife, and as you did not explain how you happened to be adrift, I concluded it must have been the work of an enemy. I was strengthened in this reasoning, from the fact that, after you left last evening, to go to your boat I saw the face of a man—a perfectly fiendish face—in the branches of a tree beyond the river. This face was turned toward the landing where you stood.

"I thought, as it vanished immediately, that it was a vision of my imagination; but I now believe it to have been the face of the man who afterward shot you."

"You astonish me, Rose," said the young man. "You are, indeed, a most brave, daring, and self-sacrificing heroine; and never, as long as life is given me, shall I forget this eventful evening and night, and your noble conduct.

"I feel proud, and highly honored, by the interest you have taken in me, a stranger; but it does seem that the Fates have settled it that our lives are to be connected in some manner.

"The circumstances under which our acquaintance and friendship have been formed, have been most strange, tragic, and astonishing; more so, I hope, than we shall again experience. From the fact that you saw the face of a man beyond the river—evidently a spy—I am inclined to think it must have been the same scoundrel who cut me adrift, and who then galloped down the river, when discovering that his plan had been frustrated, he dashed upstream again, there to lie in wait, and assassinate me.

"However, I have been most mercifully preserved, this being the third time he has attempted to kill me. And the same villain, Rosa, has sworn to make you his wife. I overheard him make his boast, and wager that he would become familiarly acquainted with you within a week's time. This was between him and his companions, while I lay in my boat, in a sheltered cove up the river.

"I registered a vow, Rosa, before I fell asleep, that I would seek your acquaintance in advance of him, and warn you against him; but, strange to say, he has been the means of our being brought together, by casting me adrift, although his intention was that I should be swept into the Gulf of Mexico, and lost."

"Oh, Roy, who is this man you speak of? The horrid assassin—I hope you will have him arrested. Perhaps he has again galloped down the river, watching to ascertain if you were really dead, and so observed me in your boat.

"Oh, what will become of me if he has? And he will kill you now; he will not allow you to reach your home alive!"

The fair girl clung to Roy, as a tender vine to a noble tree; gazing up into his face with an expression of regard and apprehension.

Roy Randolph, upon reviewing the near past, confessed that he had been blind not to have sooner perceived that the beautiful belle of the Brazos loved him ardently; giving him, unasked, her innocent maiden affection. She was by far too guileless and unworldly to conceal her sentiments; and his own brave, manly heart throbbed and swelled with a joy that could not be expressed in words.

The love that had sprung into life upon first beholding our heroine, but which had been crushed down and repudiated as unmanly, now

boldly asserted itself, although mastered and kept under control by his powerful will.

That this lovely and innocent maiden was unable to repress her affection for, and trust in him, he was positive; and he vowed that he would cherish that love, watch over and protect her, trusting that in time something might occur that would cause her father and him to become friends, and that the parent's anxiety for his daughter's happiness would cause him to consent to their union.

It took but a moment or so for Roy to come to a decision in this respect, and to form an understanding with himself.

Then he spoke impulsively, but most earnestly; halting as he did so, and clasping his hands about the shoulders of Rosa, as he gazed into her upturned face.

"Rosa Ray," he said, "we have, in a most mysterious manner, been brought together twice within a few hours, and under most trying and peculiar circumstances, we never having met previously. I cannot but hope that, in the future, we are destined often to meet.

"I am sure that I cannot be happy, unless I know, by frequently seeing you, that all is well with you. I am aware that your father would be furious, did he know that we had met; did he know that you had formed an acquaintance with any man, that was liable to deepen into an attachment. But he is wrong to put such restrictions upon you.

"Love is natural, and cannot be restrained. And now, here, on this flower-bespangled prairie, under the silvery smile of Heaven's approval, I confess to you, Rosa Ray, that I, Roy Randolph, love you—that I love you as I never have, and never shall again, as long as life lasts, love any one! I fully, truthfully believe we were created for each other—fated to be brought together, to live together, to die together! And now tell me, Rosa, as your eyes have already told me, do you love me as I love you—more than all the world, more than life?"

"I have proved it to-night, Roy. Why ask me what you already know? Yes, I do love you; and I always shall!"

"God bless you, darling!"

Thus spoke our hero, as he lifted Rosa from her feet, and pressed her to his breast.

"Now, Rosa, we will walk on; for I love you too well to delay your homeward steps at such a time as this. I do not think you will find any difficulty in regaining your chamber, or that your absence has been discovered. In fact, we know that there would be a great hue and cry, and parties out in all directions, if you had been missed."

"I have little fear now, Roy," returned the girl; "for it cannot be past midnight, although it seems ages since we met—years since I arose from my sleepless couch. And now, I will tell you, that it was thinking of you that banished sleep; it was anxiety on your account that caused me to seek the landing. And now I shall be more apprehensive than ever.

"Oh, how shall I know that you have reached your home in safety? You may be shot again; and this time meet death, and then I should die myself. I could not live without you, Roy!"

"My, darling, you must not worry about me. I have had two warnings, and shall now be on the alert. I'll trace the assassin, and will have my revenge. I did not suppose there could be found on the lower Brazos, a human being so dastardly as to ambush and shoot a man in such a way.

"But, forewarned is forearmed. I am now a match for all such miscreants. But now I insist that you retire, and endeavor to get some sleep. Two nights from this, I will meet you at the landing, or near it. The whistle of the whip-poor-will will tell you my whereabouts. I will recover our boats, and will return yours, with the oars, to-morrow night.

"Keep your people from the landing, if possible, that no one may perceive that your skiff is missing. Now, use caution, Rosa! All is quiet; but I will await until I know you have reached your apartment. Be sure that you banish all but happy thoughts."

The youthful pair had now arrived at the magnolias, beneath the shades of which they parted; Rosa stealing toward the mansion, and taking advantage of the shrubbery to screen her as she advanced. In this way our heroine gained her room; and Roy Randolph, after patting and fondling Hero, whispering thanks in the ear of the noble dog for his faithful services, and daring deed in repulsing the alligator, sprung into the thick timber.

Away beyond the Bend, the young man darted, and up the Rio Brazos; but he had no intention of going to his home, for he had work before him on the morrow.

Roy Randolph had resolved to trail Louis LeGrand, in the morning!

CHAPTER XI.

A SIGHT OF THE AVENGER.

THE brain of Louis LeGrand was in a terribly demoralized state, and no wonder was it; for, added to the fact that he had assassinated Roy Randolph, as he believed, he now knew that he had murdered his faithful old slave. He felt now that it was quite probable that his com-

rades, who knew that only he and old Dan had been in the vicinity, would denounce him as the murderer.

Not that the killing of a negro amounted to much at that time and place, but Dan was a general favorite in the neighborhood, and it would be a blot upon his name.

Le Grand had drank a great quantity of liquor, which had excited him to frenzy; and this, in conjunction with the furious hatred and thirst for revenge that possessed him, and was now accomplished, did not relieve his brain in the least.

The horrors that ensued had transformed him into little less than a madman, and when he found that he had murdered old Dan, he was the most miserable and pitiable of wretches on the face of the earth. We may easily imagine also, that the conflict with the bear did not improve his mental condition.

At times, however, as he dashed onward, there would occur an interval when his thoughts were more reasonable, and he strove to think in what manner he could cover his crimes or destroy all evidence that pointed to him as the criminal; and it was when he had reached a point fully a mile from the camp that it suddenly occurred to him that he could so dispose of the corpse of Old Dan as to lead any one, who might discover the body, to decide that the negro had been slain in an encounter with the bear.

This idea, once pondered upon, remained fixed in his mind as a very cleverly-conceived plan and one that would clear him of all complicity in the affair; and he at once drew rein, allowing his foaming horse to proceed leisurely, in order that he might more fully take in the situation.

He well knew that no proofs existed of his connection with the assassination of Roy Randolph; this was plainly evident, as no plantation was nearer the scene of his crime than that of Captain Ray, which was fully two and a half miles distant. Not only this, but he fully believed that the corpse was never likely to be discovered.

If the boat did not reach the Gulf before daylight, there was a probability of the body being dragged from the skiff and devoured by alligators; for Le Grand had observed that it was low in the water forward, and that Roy's arm hung over the side into the river.

Besides this, no one could decide at what point in the river Roy had been shot, and his comrades would remember that he had sent him adrift alive. Old Dan had been well aware of this fact, but his lips were mute forever. He had destroyed the only witness that he knew had seen Roy Randolph last alive, but asleep.

Banishing the assassination as a crime with which he could not be proven to have been connected, Le Grand at once decided that he was safe, but he must first fix the body of the negro to suit him, and then he might defy the future. His mind was now less excited, although he continued at times to drink from his flask.

Some length of time elapsed before he again reached the camp, and he shuddered with terror and superstition as the corpse of his poor old slave met his view.

Nevertheless he was forced to overcome these feelings to a certain extent, else he could not accomplish his purpose, fear of detection causing him much fright, as people would be more apt to think that he had killed Roy Randolph, if the body of the latter should be discovered, when the crime of slaying his slave was placed at his door.

Securing his horse at the patch of wild rye, the animal giving a whinny of delight at being again with its kind, Le Grand at once proceeded to carry out his scheme.

He well knew that many of the young men in that vicinity were experienced trailers, and that he must proceed with the utmost care, otherwise he would leave "sign" that would betray him.

Fortunately the carcass of the bear was not far from the corpse of old Dan; and, gathering his strength, the master bore his murdered slave to the spot fixed upon, being forced to allow the limbs to drag as he did so. Le Grand shuddered from head to foot, his face was ghastly, his eyes wild and starting from their sockets, as he lifted the cold and stiffened corpse in his arms; the soulless eyes of the old negro being fastened upon his own in seeming appeal and condemnation.

Flinging the body upon that of the dead bear, the paws of which he clasped about the corpse, Le Grand placed old Dan's knife, after thrusting the blade into the bloody wound of the bear, in the hand of the dead man. He then forced the claws of the beast into the slave's garments and flesh.

Having thus arranged them in such a manner as would lead one to decide at once, upon discovery, that both man and beast had died when in fierce conflict, Le Grand, with the top of a bush, brushed over the trail that had been made by his dragging the corpse, and put the crushed down grass into a natural position.

Giving a satisfied look at his work, the miscreant strode toward the horses, convinced that

He had swept all traces of crime from the camp.

Notwithstanding his care, however, Le Grand, as do all criminals, left plain traces of his crime, as will be hereafter shown. But greatly relieved, and fully believing that neither of the murders could, in any possible manner, be traced to him, the villain cast himself into a thicket, utterly prostrated with fatigue, both physical and mental, and was asleep in a moment.

But the sleep of Louis Le Grand was only a series of horrible dreams, while deep groans continued to burst from his frothing lips. So benumbed, however, were his nerves, from his recent exertions, and from having been so overtaxed, that he could not awaken, although so terribly tortured.

Full an hour passed in this way, when the animals suddenly reared and plunged, snorting with affright, the mule pulling back upon its lariat, its hoofs striking the limbs of Le Grand in the thicket, as it crushed the bushes beneath them. Le Grand sprung upright, great beads of perspiration standing upon his forehead, and his eyes starting in horror; for, as he lay, he had naturally gazed upward before springing to his feet, the bushes, being pressed down by the terrified animal, giving him a clear view of the lower limbs of the huge trees above.

And no wonder that the suddenly awakened man was appalled, especially when the state of his mind is considered, for, upon a large lower limb, not ten feet from his position, was a huge panther; its back arched, its fur standing out cat-like, and its immense claws tearing at the bark, preparatory to making a bound downward.

Le Grand felt that his time had come.

The eyes of the terrible beast glowed like coals of fire, and the wretched man knew that the animal would instantly spring downward; yet he was, as it were, chained to the spot with horror and dread, and could not move a muscle.

However, his terrible suspense was of short duration, for the panther almost immediately shot through the air, landing directly upon the back of the mule, and not three feet from Le Grand's head. Then followed a fearful struggling, a crashing of brush, and a tearing of flesh and hide; while the mule, with fearful snorts, bounded away into the dense shades, the panther still clinging to it, and sucking the blood from its neck veins!

The frantic struggles of the horses caused Le Grand to recover himself, and hasten to his steed, unloosing the neck-ropes, springing into the saddle, and once again speeding from the camp, impressed with the belief that there was to be no peace for him henceforth, that dangers and horrors would surround and torture him, while the death that he would eventually covet would be denied him, or come in some dread and lingering form.

Once more he hastened down the Brazos, this time with no more particular object than the last. But suddenly he recalled the fact that the ground over which he had hastened to gain a covert on the river bank from which to shoot Roy Randolph, was soft, so also was the thicket from which he had fired the fatal shot.

His trail would, in the event of Roy's murder being discovered, be followed by keen-eyed men; and now he berated himself for an idiot, for he recollected that he had, in his excited state after sending the spherical messenger of death on its mission, hurled his rifle into the river.

This rifle was silver-mounted, a silver plate being upon the breech, and on it was engraved his name; and this silver, if the water was not very deep, could be seen from the thicket, especially by men looking for "sign."

This would be most damning proof, and must be attended to at once.

Securing his horse, Le Grand stole toward the river, glancing suspiciously on every side as he did so. After much tearing through the undergrowth, he at length descried the silvery sheen of waters. A moment after, he stood in the very spot from whence he had fired his rifle, and, parting the bushes, he swept the banks of the Brazos, up and down on each side.

No living, moving object was within view, and even the usual sounds of night-birds and frogs seemed subdued and guarded.

The scene was weird, but grand and impressive.

Nature's wild and abundant luxuriance fringed the long and wide silvery sheen of waters, but Louis Le Grand had neither the time nor the inclination to study the vista. Realizing that he could not locate the position of the gun without a pole, he quickly drew his knife, and selecting a suitable sapling, he severed it from the ground near the roots, and then trimmed off the branches.

Le Grand then stepped forward, parted the bushes, and again gazed suspiciously around him.

All at once his form grew rigid, his face the pallor of death, while his eyes started from their sockets, fixed and staring across the river, where standing motionless as a statue, was a human form of robust build, every outline and lineament of which was plainly revealed.

Well might the miscreant, Le Grand, quake in terror, for that form and face belonged to his victim! There could be no mistake.

It was the ghost, the apparition of Roy Randolph come to haunt him.

For a moment Le Grand stood trembling in every nerve, a picture of abject terror; the very blood in his veins seemed to congeal, the pulsations of his heart to stop. Then he whirled in his tracks, dropped his pole, and with a cry that was half-shriek and half-bowl, tore through the undergrowth like a madman. Soon, however, he fell prostrate, lying there panting, for a time; he then crawled to his horse, and once more had recourse to his brandy-flask.

The fiery liquor, in a measure, restored him, and, for a few moments, he sat on the damp sward pondering. At length he reasoned that his senses had deceived him—he had seen nothing. He recalled the hideous imaginings which had been his during the night, and he decided that this was of the same character.

Having arrived at this conclusion, he proceeded, after another dose of the brandy, to retrace his steps, and soon reached the thicket, where he discovered the pole projecting from the water, its lower end thrust into the mud, as if to mark the spot his trailers must search. He saw that he had been once again an idiot, and was convinced that his latest reasonings were correct, for, upon gazing over the river to the point where he had seen the apparition, there was nothing in sight, except the huge log that projected over the water from out the undergrowth, and upon which he had fancied that he saw the form of Leroy Randolph.

A low, hoarse laugh left the miscreant's lips as he endeavored to grasp the end of the pole, leaning over, clear of the bushes, to clutch it, but the laugh was changed to a gurgling, gasping sound, and again his swarthy face became ghastly, while his frame trembled as before.

There, on the opposite bank, some fifty yards above the point at which he had before seen it, was that same dread specter, Roy Randolph, as natural as life!

He stood, with both arms upraised, both forefingers pointing skyward, as if warning the wretch who beheld him of the existence of one to whom vengeance belonged—of the retribution that must soon overtake him.

There was no mistake this time. This was no hallucination—no vision of the imagination.

For a full minute the eyes of Le Grand were frozen upon the form of Roy, his victim, his own position at the time being disregarded, when slowly his form sunk forward, and he instinctively caught at the pole, but missed it. He lost his balance and the next instant Louis Le Grand shot forward, and with a sounding plunge, sunk beneath the waters of the Rio Brazos.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

As has been previously intimated, Roy Randolph after leaving Bend Plantation, immediately proceeded up the Brazos, to the point at which he had been shot by the concealed assassin.

He had not the slightest doubt that Louis Le Grand was the man who had set him adrift, and who had also sought his life, in a more sure and deadly manner, but which, too, had been unsuccessful.

In far-reaching strides, Roy proceeded, his head bare, his hair flying over his broad shoulders in the wind of his speed, while the cool night air braced and invigorated him. In less than an hour after departing from the bend, he reached the locality where the assassin's bullet so nearly cost him his life: he having kept open ground, and avoided the windings of the river.

Plunging into the bottom timber, our hero proceeded directly through the same to the river, using caution, as he neared the bank; for he reasoned, that possibly the miscreant who had attempted his life might be still in the vicinity, as it was an unfrequented section. He well knew that the companions of Le Grand, who had been encamped with the latter, were unprincipled rascals, as far as petty rascalities went; but he did not believe there was one among them who would be even an accomplice in a capital crime.

They were addicted to gambling, and were not particular in regard to the tricks they practiced when playing for money; besides this, they had all of them bad reputations in other respects. But, they had proved, at the time of the duel between himself and Le Grand, that they admired a brave man, and would not permit undue advantage to be taken in a so-called affair of honor; especially when such advantage would culminate in nothing less than cowardly murder, as would have been the case, had the bullet, fired by Le Grand in the duello, before the word, found its intended mark.

Notwithstanding Roy had thought it possible he might see Le Grand in the vicinity, he was greatly astonished, upon peering through the bushes, to at once discover the face of the very man who filled his thoughts; gazing from a thicket, up and down the river, as if fearing observation.

Roy had based his reasoning in regard to Le

Grand's being in the neighborhood, on the grounds that he would not dare return to the camp, up-river, after the cowardly murder he had attempted, and he saw now that he had been right.

Only for a moment was Louis Le Grand's face discernible. Then it vanished; and instantly Roy decided that the miscreant had something on hand which would occasion a speedy return. This he judged by the manner in which the villain acted.

He determined, therefore, to give the supposed assassin a fright, by revealing himself; thus proving beyond a doubt that Le Grand was the man that shot him, as the villain would undoubtedly show signs of guilt at the appearance of his victim—the man, whom he must suppose to be dead, and floating away, many miles below, toward the Gulf.

The reader has already been informed of the effect produced upon Le Grand by Roy's appearance, at two different points, on the bank; our hero changing place and position that it might seem more impressive. He at once perceived that Le Grand believed him to be an apparition, the terror and horror expressed proving to Roy, conclusively, that the miscreant who shot him was none other than the one he had suspected.

When Le Grand shot into the river, however, disappearing from view in the depths, Roy was in a state of great concern; for he did not think such an easy death would be a just fate for such a double-dyed villain. Instantly concealing himself, Roy awaited the reappearance of Le Grand, not knowing whether the wretch could swim, and curious as to what movement he would make.

In a moment or two he arose to the surface, but at some distance down the stream from the spot at which he had plunged in. And now, a most strange and exciting scene ensued; for the splashing had attracted the attention of the alligators in a small cove near Le Grand, and half-a dozen huge heads appeared, moving slowly toward the swimmer. As the latter perceived the slimy monsters, he filled the night air with his shrieks, while he made frantic efforts to gain the bank.

Slowly the huge saurians neared the horrified swimmer, the latter being carried down stream by the current, until the bank of the river was full twenty feet in height, and nearly perpendicular.

Never, perhaps, did man struggle more frantically to escape a horrible death than did Louis Le Grand; and only one chance seemed open to save him. This was the root of a tree, which projected from the bank, some seven feet from the water, hanging downward nearly to the same.

Most desperately did Le Grand strike for the bank at the point where this root projected, knowing that if he missed the same he was a lost man; that he would soon be drawn into the dark and muddy depths, and torn and devoured by the hideous monsters, whose eyes now glittered from out their ill-shaped slimy heads, that concealed jaws that would rend the body of a man in an instant.

Fast Le Grand neared his one hope of life, and fast the saurians approached their intended prey; which, long ere this, would have been theirs had not the piercing shrieks deterred them from the attack.

Directly beneath the root, Le Grand was swept down, and with desperate clutch he grasped the same, drawing himself up by a herculean effort; the sounds beneath him causing his hair to stand on end, and the blood to run cold in his veins: for, the alligators, seeing their prey was about to escape them, all made frantic lunges onward and upward, their forepaws digging into the soft mud at the base of the bank.

And there suspended, clinging for dear life to the root, which was, luckily for him, a strong one, hung Louis Le Grand; his toes kicking out the earth, and forming a partial support, the greater part of his weight being sustained by his grip on the root. And, below him, the monster lizards snapped their jaws; dragging, at times, their slimy bodies partly clear of the waters, and their horrible teeth being within six inches of Le Grand's feet. Then, the earth beneath them would give way, and the repulsive saurians would fall, with a terrific plunge, into the river, the waters spattering up and over the affrighted wretch, who clung for life to the root of the tree, his face ghastly, and contorted with horror unspeakable.

The terrible predicament of Le Grand was fully realized by Roy Randolph, although he was at some distance from him; and he well knew that the miscreant could not long retain his position—that he must eventually drop, and be devoured by the hungry alligators.

This was a fate, dastardly as had been the conduct of the wretch, which Roy thought too terrible for him—too terrible for even a brute.

And, not only this, but our hero felt that, possibly the horrible experiences of the night might cause Le Grand to repent of his misdeeds and crimes, and become a better man.

Had Roy known of the bear and the panther, he would have been more decided in this opinion; which, however, would have vanished, had

he known of poor old Dan's having been murdered by the miserable dastard, now in such deadly peril.

Had Roy been aware of the old slave's death, and the cause of it, he would have felt no pity, no mercy, but considered that the miscreant merited the death which seemed in store for him. As it was, however, our hero immediately secured his belt of arms about his neck in such a manner as to prevent the same from getting wet, and grasping a log of deadwood, dry as tinder, he launched the same into the river, and with one arm over the log, struck out in a quivering course over the stream, landing at the very point where Le Grand had fallen into the water and had previously lain in wait to shoot him.

He felt convinced that Le Grand's horse must be near at hand, and, as he had already formed a plan in regard to the imperiled man, he struck through the woods, imitating the neigh of a horse, which was at once answered, and Roy was soon at the side of the black steed.

Detaching an extra lariat from the cantle of the saddle, the young man sprang at once down the river, being, in a very short time, directly above the position of Le Grand, who had coiled his limbs around the root of the tree, and was gazing downward, trembling and quivering in abject terror, his strength evidently fast leaving him. Hastily adjusting a noose of the right size, and tying a knot to prevent the same from slipping, Roy took a turn around the trunk of a stout, smooth-bark sapling with the slack end, and cast the noose over, allowing sufficient length to reach the belt of Le Grand.

In another moment Roy knew that the perilously placed man had succeeded in getting one limb through the loop, and was sustaining himself by his hands, a situation that was comfortable and safe compared with clinging to the root.

It required a great exertion of strength to pull Le Grand up a couple of feet, where it would be impossible for the alligators to reach him, without the former seeing to whom it was that he was indebted for his rescue. So Roy kept back from the edge of the bank, and the earth kept falling into the face of Le Grand. Midway between the foiled alligators and the top of the bank Le Grand was now suspended, and Roy, making fast the rope, left him thus, and hastened up the river. He was satisfied that his peculiarly secured captive was for a time in a position from which he could not escape, and that he would be there when wanted.

If the comrades of the cowardly assassin were still in the camp, Roy resolved that he would force them to accompany him, and prove Le Grand to be what he suspected him of being. This could be done by trailing him, as the sword in the bottom was soft, and Roy felt positive that the shot had been fired from the very thicket from which Le Grand had fallen into the river.

Without hesitation, therefore, he appropriated the horse of Le Grand, noticing that the animal had been ridden far and hard, and convinced that it was his face that Rosa Ray had seen across the Brazos.

This trail could be followed, but Roy decided that he would not mention it, for he wished his meeting with Rosa to be kept secret. Soon he reached the vicinity of the camp, and was somewhat surprised to see a large fire blaze up, as if just kindled.

This revealed the comrades of Louis Le Grand, all in their saddles except one, who had apparently dismounted to start the fire.

The young men appeared to be in a very excited state, for which Roy could not account; neither could he for the fact that they appeared to have just arrived upon the scene.

Spurring into the camp, in the broad circle of light, our hero with a revolver in each hand, cocked, pointed, and presented at the young men, cried out in a voice that was firm and clear as a bell:

"Hands up, gentlemen! or affiliators and helpers of an assassin—I know not which I ought to call you! Answer me quickly! Where is your leader, Louis Le Grand?"

Every hand was immediately raised as ordered, for all saw business in the eye of their visitor; his eye and manner proving that he meant what he said, while they answered in chorus:

"We have not seen him since just before sunset last evening."

"We left this camp at that time," added one, "and Le Grand and old Dan were here then. There lies the old man dead. He has been killed by a bear."

"Dead! Killed!" exclaimed Roy in amazement, and utterly disbelieving them.

Then, as he cast his eyes on the opposite side of the camp he lowered his revolvers, sprang from his saddle with a look of deep grief upon his countenance as he repeated:

"Dead! Killed! old Dan, dead? What does this mean? Gentlemen, excuse my haste and suspicions. When you know everything you will not blame me."

"Please to remain where you are until I examine the body of poor old Dan—the best and kindest-hearted, the worst abused slave on the Rio Brazos."

CHAPTER XI.

SAVED, BUT FOR WHAT?

GRASPING a torch from the fire, Roy at once hastened to the spot where lay the corpse of old Dan, and the dead bear.

The first thing that attracted the attention of our hero was a terribly swollen bruise on the head of the negro, extending from the temple, back over, and beyond the ear. This was plain evidence of there having been a crushing blow struck with some hard and unyielding substance.

A hurried inspection of the position of the dead slave and of the bear, and a close examination of the ground followed; and then Roy discovered that the bark on a tree near the bear was much scratched. Not only this, but he sprang upward and detached a piece of cloth, to which clung a button by a few threads. The face of our hero suddenly assumed a stern and merciless expression, as he held the tell-tale cloth near to the fire-light.

There were neither stones nor logs beneath the tree, the sword so near the water being moist and soft, it was very evident that old Dan could not have received the bruises by falling from the tree. Neither could the bear have caused it by a blow of its paw without leaving the mark of its claws. These were, at the same time, inspected, and it was found that not a single particle of wool clung to them.

The young men maintained their positions, watching eagerly every movement of Roy, and all being sincerely grieved at the death of the slave.

They had had their fun on many occasions, and in rather a rough way with poor old Dan, but they all liked him, and had often remonstrated with Le Grand when the latter ill-treated and abused him.

This was when they were sober; for, when drinking, they drowned the better part of their natures.

"Men!" cried out Roy at length, "secure your horses and attend here! There has been foul play."

Without a word, all obeyed this summons, and hastened to the scene of blood.

"Now, gentlemen," continued the young man, "look at and examine poor Dan's head. Look at the respective positions of the bear and the man. That bear was called long after Dan was. The beast was evidently slain by Le Grand, who was chased up the tree by him. You recognize this cloth and button as belonging to your friend's hunting-jacket?"

"Yes!" was the reply from all present.

"Well, I found that up the tree. Now, open the beast's mouth and you will see that it received its death-wound from a pistol or rifle. The tongue and lips are burned with powder, and the course of the bullet can be easily traced. Le Grand shot the bear while he was in the tree and then stabbed the beast with his bowie. You see he was not cunning enough to put old Dan's own knife in his hand. There was foul murder racking his brain or he would never have so forgotten himself."

"I here assert, and maintain, that poor Dan was killed—murdered by his master—last evening, and that the bear was slain not long since. You can see for yourselves that the carcass is not yet stiff or entirely free from animal heat—"

"Ah! what is that?"

Roy stepped quickly beyond the listeners toward the cove and picked up a club.

"Here is fresh evidence," he said, holding the billet near a torch. "Advance all, and you will see that this is the weapon with which Le Grand struck the terrible blow that freed old Dan from bondage and life in an instant! Blood and wool still adhere to it. Are you convinced?"

"Rather strong evidence, I admit," agreed one, "but how can we prove that Le Grand struck the blow?"

"Either Louis Le Grand struck the blow, or one of you did it?" exclaimed Roy. "You and he are all who have been in this locality."

"Except yourself, Randolph," corrected another, "but no one suspects you, although from the manner in which you collect evidence one would naturally say that you had been a witness to the deed, if not a participator in it."

Not the least show of anger was in the face of Roy, or in his voice, as he returned:

"Did not you gentlemen soon after camping here make a wager with Le Grand in regard to a certain young lady who resides on the Rio Brazos?"

The young men stared at each other in amazement.

"I am answered," said Roy, quickly. "Now, tell me what followed without reserve, and reveal the whole facts, for I may know more than you suppose. This is no trifling business, young men, as you will soon admit."

"I'll speak for all," said one, gazing at his companions questioningly.

They all nodded in acquiescence.

"Old Dan went to the bank of the cave to pick up wood and betrayed by his actions that he had seen something strange that startled him from below; but he soon went on with his

work, evidently wishing to pretend that he had discovered nothing unusual. Le Grand had, however, observed him, and he sprang to the bank, we following, I just caught a glimpse of you, as you lay asleep in your boat, when Le Grand ordered us away and stole down the bank."

"We decided that he intended to start you adrift, and not wishing to be implicated in the affair, we hastily saddled up and slid out."

"Why did you not alarm me? How did you know that his intentions were not to murder me?"

"He would have shot the first man who interfered with him in any way," was the reply. "He has had it in for you ever since the duel."

"We knew," said another, "that he dared not kill you, in the helpless condition in which you were. That would have been murder."

"It seems," rejoined Roy, "that he did not hesitate to murder his helpless old slave. And what would you say if I should tell you that he secreted himself in a thicket, and shot me from behind? You can see the track of his bullet on my head."

"Gentlemen, I tell you that your friend, Louis Le Grand, is a vile coward and assassin! Do you profess to be his friends, knowing this? If so, quit my sight, or I will not answer for the consequences!"

"We are the friends of no assassin!" exclaimed one of the young men, while the others stood for a few moments dumfounded.

They then advanced to examine Roy's head.

"I hope to see you act accordingly then," said our hero. "Three times Le Grand has attempted to take my life, and each time in a most dastardly manner; twice since you encamped here."

"And now I swear that he shall die!"

"He shall fight me—fight for his life! I take no advantage of any man; and I ask you now to follow me, as witnesses. But first, let me explain his acts and movements since you left the camp."

Roy now related, but without bringing Rosa Ray into the narrative, his two trips up and down the Brazos; his having been shot, the fright he gave Le Grand, and the saving of the latter from a horrible death.

As may be imagined, all were greatly astonished and exceedingly enraged; for although, as has been mentioned, they were dissipated gamblers—though this was more for lack of something else to do than aught else—they were not men who would commit any great crime. All were satisfied that Le Grand had murdered old Dan, and had also attempted to slay Roy Randolph in a most cowardly manner; and having been associates with Le Grand, they were furious, feeling that all this reflected on themselves. Consequently they were not averse to seeing the Dastard worsted, as he would most assuredly be at the hands of Roy.

We will here mention that, at the time and place of which we write, there was but little attempt to administer justice by regular course of law, the people, or organized bands of *Vigilantes* dealing promptly with those who merited punishment, and in some cases with those who did not. And no crime was considered greater than drawing or using weapons on an unarmed man, unless it might be insulting a woman or stealing a horse or cow.

All were greatly and favorably impressed with the forbearance of Roy, who, in place of saving Le Grand from the alligators, ought, they declared, to have left him to his fate—a fate he richly merited.

There was not a man in the crowd who, under like circumstances, would have spared the miscreant, or given him any chance for his life; and all agreed that Roy was a fool to engage in a personal conflict with him—that he ought to hang Le Grand like a dog, thus putting an end to his miserable career, in a manner that his acts deserved.

The overbearing insolence and assumption of superiority over them of late by Le Grand, had much incensed them; and this explained their sudden repudiation of him as a friend, and a desire to be well rid of him before he disgraced them further. Yet not one of the number would have assumed leadership against Le Grand, for the purpose of hanging him; for they all feared him, and deemed his blustering bravado downright bravery.

The blood-stained face, the bruised head and gray wool of old Dan greatly incensed all against the murderer; and Roy Randolph brushed a tear from his cheek, as he gazed down upon the ashen, smeared features, and soulless eyes of the poor old slave, who had oft sung to him, in his own quaint way, the songs of the old plantation. But the murderous scene also stirred up the strongest feelings of hatred against Le Grand, and a desire for immediate revenge.

With this feeling uppermost, Roy yelled:

"To horse, gentlemen! To horse! I'll give Le Grand, the Dastard, a fair show, steel to steel; but justice rules my arm, and he dies! He shall pollute this fair earth no more with his vile breath and tread."

All sprang into their saddles, and left the camp; the flames of the camp-fire, at times,

shooting upward, and lighting up the dead face of poor old Dan.

One of the party rode alongside of Roy, explaining that they had been up the river, and had encamped; but, becoming worried in regard to his safety, they had broken camp for a tour of investigation, intending, after gaining what intelligence they could from old Dan—if Le Grand should be asleep, which they inferred—to gallop down the Brazos to his rescue, for they were by this time sobered off, and began to fear that mischief had been done.

Our hero did not for a moment suppose it to be possible for Le Grand to gain the upper bank without assistance; hence they did not urge their horses, but stopped at the point where the miscreant had fired the shot at Roy, the latter pointing out the thicket, and all resolving to examine the same by daylight.

Proceeding on they soon reached the high bank, over which Roy had left Le Grand suspended; the lariat being plainly seen as they rode up.

But our hero, as had been arranged, urged his horse into a thicket, not wishing to be seen by the would-be assassin; he having formed a plan to pretend that they were riding that way and discovered the lariat, thus being the means of rescuing him from a perilous predicament.

They then proposed to question him within the hearing of Roy, in regard to the whereabouts of the latter, and the death of old Dan.

But these arrangements were of no avail; for upon one of their number grasping the rawhide rope, he found it slack, and drawing it up quickly, threw it at his feet in disappointment and rage.

Louis Le Grand, the Dastard, had escaped death again.

He had left plain "sign" where he had climbed up the bank.

Truly it can be said, in some cases, that "the devil favors his own!"

CHAPTER XIV.

SATAN LET LOOSE.

WHEN Louis Le Grand gained the root of the tree, kicked out the earth, and inserted his toes in the holes, he found that he could sustain himself without much difficulty or expenditure of strength.

Had this not been so, he would have fallen back into the jaws of the alligator; for not another minute could he have continued the desperate exertion, the strain of muscle which he had been forced to maintain since he first observed the heads of the monster saurians approaching him.

Even as he gained the position we have mentioned, his horror was little lessened, for he was panting like a bound after a long race, and trembling from head to foot. He felt deathly weak, and was conscious that he could not long maintain his present position.

Not for an instant, when in the river, had he thought of or examined the bank above him; his only hope had been to clutch that root and draw himself above the reach of the hideous monsters that were approaching him to rend him limb from limb.

But as soon as he saw that he was above the reach of the alligators, he gazed upward, not until then realizing that it was a matter of impossibility for him to reach the upper bank and a place of safety. A groan of the most intense agony and hopeless despair burst from him as he realized this.

The experiences of the night had been sufficiently horrible and torturing to have plunged most men into insanity.

From the time that he had launched Roy Randolph adrift, Louis Le Grand had been plunged into a very whirlpool of terrors, most awful even to contemplate, to say nothing of experiencing. Well might he admit the truth of the proverb, "The way of the transgressor is hard."

However, the heart and soul of Le Grand were completely hardened, and all that had transpired, which ought to have caused him to repent of his deeds and resolve to reform should his life be spared, influenced him in just the opposite direction. The fact that he had had his revenge upon Roy—that he had slain the latter, and thus not only wiped out past wrongs—which existed only in his imagination—that he had removed from his path the man who he now knew would have defeated his plans in connection with Rosa Ray—cheered the wretch through all that had followed.

The Belle of the Brazos should be his—he swore it by all the fiends repeatedly; she should be his now by foul means, since all chance seemed to be cut off to gain her in a regular way.

As on the previous occasion, he now reasoned that the specter he had seen was occasioned by his having drank heavily, and from having his victim so constantly in his thoughts.

Had he glanced up the river at that moment he would have beheld the supposed ghost swimming across the same, in the most natural manner.

He had failed in the attempt to remove the only proof that could be brought against him in

connection with Roy's assassination, should the corpse of the latter be discovered. The rifle was still in the water. Not only that, but he now saw that if he could maintain his present position, he might be discovered by the very men who would go out in search of him, or in search of trace of Roy Randolph. And, if they found his gun and his pole, himself and his trail to a point opposite Bend Plantation, then all would be most damning proofs against him.

These thoughts, deductions and conclusions flashed through the mind of Le Grand in a moment.

But his present peril soon banished all else, as he gazed downward, with increased horror, to see that the monster alligators were, in their frantic struggles to reach his feet, undermining the bank.

This totally undreamed-of danger appalled him, plunging him again into the depths of despair. The most horrible and dangerous denizens of the Brazos and its bottom timber, seemed to have taken this night of all others to pursue him to his death, as if they knew what his crimes had been, or were influenced by a higher power to rid the earth of his presence.

But he had no time for thought, for the bank suddenly gave way, and again he hung downward, sustained only by his grip on the root above his head. This very nearly relaxed, causing a cry of horror to escape the wretch, and the sweat of agony to stand out on his forehead, his eyes starting out in terror.

Again his life hung by a hair, but with a desperate and frantic effort, Le Grand swung outward, wound his limbs about the root, and was again safe for the time being. But his muscles had been overstrained, as well as his nerves, and he knew that the struggle for existence could not last much longer; he knew that at any moment he might be overcome by weakness or faintness, lose his hold and plunge downward to the most fearful death that could be imagined.

There was not the least ray of hope.

If it were possible for him to keep his position until sunrise, he believed that the alligators would retire to their haunts in the mud of the cove above, and thus open a way of escape; but this he felt that he could not do.

Every moment he knew that his strength was going fast, and that the end must be near; yet he gave not one thought to a prayer for deliverance or for mercy. His great struggle, mentally, was to drown all thoughts of the dread future, probably believing it to be worse than useless to plead for one who was as little fit to live as to die.

Growing weaker and weaker, slipping once full four inches down the root, but tightening his clutch with the strength of desperation; thus was the trembling wretch, when, to his utmost astonishment and insane joy, the lariat lowered by Roy Randolph brushed his face.

Le Grand nearly fell from the root, such was his extreme relief, and had our hero at that moment bent over the bank, thus revealing his presence, there is no doubt the wretch would have fallen into the ready jaws of the monsters below. For a moment or so Le Grand was unable to control himself, such was the sudden reaction from despair. Then he succeeded in thrusting one leg through the loop.

Relinquishing one hand from its grip on the root, he clutched the rope, and then raising his other leg, he managed to get it also through the loop, thus being seated in a natural position, and easily balancing himself with a slight hold by one hand. Le Grand now felt that he was saved; but not one thought of thanks to God or man was in his mind—nothing except self-gratulation.

But, as he was being drawn upward, he felt some curiosity in regard to whom it might be who had arrived upon the scene so opportunely.

Suddenly, however, he came to a stop when but half-way up the bank, and he knew by the firmness of the rope that it was no longer held by man, but secured to a tree above.

He fixed his gaze upward in curious expectation, but naught except the clay bank and the dark green foliage met his view. His mysterious preserver was nowhere visible.

Thus Le Grand hung for some time, whirling and swaying, filled with amazement, for all was still above him, and nothing could be seen or heard that indicated the presence of a human being.

He now endeavored, by way of relieving the strain upon the muscles of his neck, to assume something like a natural poise. This drew his attention to the knot on the lariat just in front of him, and it caused him to start with surprise and to knit his brows in deep thought.

Whoever his preserver might be, Le Grand now knew that he procured the rope from his saddle; for he recognized the plait of the lariat, and the peculiar manner in which the end knot was tied.

Then it was that it occurred to the guilty mind of the miscreant that the rope was an indication that men were on his trail; that old Dan's body had been discovered by men who had not been deceived by his plot, or else that Roy's corpse had been found, and "sign" de-

tected that pointed to the identity of himself as the assassin.

Not only did the lariat indicate this, but the fact that the man who had rescued him had not revealed himself, who had left him suspended as he was, gave the most convincing proof that his reasonings were correct. In an instant Le Grand concluded that he was a captive, and secured thus in order that those in pursuit of him should be able to gain still stronger proofs of his crimes.

Scarce five minutes had elapsed since his release from his former fearful position when, rendered desperate by his own irresistible conclusions and strengthened by his brief rest, he determined that he would foil those who sought his life—those who, without doubt, intended to hang him like a dog—for he felt more terror of the rope than of any of the deaths to which he had been exposed.

His whisky flask still remained in his pocket; and pouring a quantity of the fiery liquor down his throat, Le Grand, with desperate resolution, raised himself to a standing posture in the loop, caught the lariat firmly, and as high up as was possible, and then, pulling outward, he dug his boots into the bank, working his way up rapidly, concentrating his full strength in the one desperate effort to surmount the bank.

A moment after, and with an ejaculation of relief he stood upright on *terra firma* and gazed anxiously around him.

Not a human or brute was within sight. Hesitating not a moment he rushed like a madman up the river, keeping close to the bank and pointing directly for the cove. He reached the camp just as Roy Randolph spurred his horse into the firelight, the latter having been obliged to travel in a half-circle.

Stealing around the head of the cove through the undergrowth, Le Grand gained a position at the same point whence he had glided down the bank to push Roy's boat out into the current of the Brazos; and it was just as he had gained a favorable lurking-place that his supposed victim galloped into the camp with his revolvers presented, as has been described.

Le Grand had been amazed at the flash of the fire and the discovery of his associates mounted upon their horses; he reasoning that, from appearances, they had just arrived in the camp. But at the sudden galloping of his own black steed into view, with Roy Randolph, whom he had believed dead and floating toward the Mexican Gulf, in the saddle, the wretch was nearly paralyzed with amazement and terror.

That Roy was alive and able to wreak his vengeance on his would-be assassin was plain, and the mystery of the apparitions beyond the Brazos was now explained. Not only so, but he now saw the meaning of his half-way rescue from the alligators; for as Roy was mounted upon the black horse, Le Grand knew that it was he who had cast the lariat down the bank.

The conversation, investigations, and resolution of Roy and the late associates of Le Grand, which have been explained, were all heard, observed, and understood by the latter, and he congratulated himself upon having again escaped death—this time by the rope—for he well knew, that had he remained in the looped lariat, his doom would have been sealed.

Rendered perfectly furious at his failure to kill Roy, and realizing that he could now no longer remain in the neighborhood in safety—that Roy Randolph would force him into a duel and kill him, even had the latter nothing more against him than the murder of old Dan—realizing that he could not return to his own plantation, except in the most stealthy manner, and by night, when even his slaves, who had been so shamefully misused by him, would betray him; all this caused Le Grand to clench his teeth, and swear by everything unholy, that he would yet consummate his revenge. Roy Randolph should die by his hand, and Rosa Ray, willing or unwilling, should be his victim.

He vowed that, if a dozen lives must be sacrificed, Roy and Rosa should not be man and wife; that he would abduct her, and fly to the chaparrals, toward or over the Rio Grande, but first making a sure shot at Roy Randolph.

Taking a deep draught from his flask, Le Grand, with the look of a fiend, a bloodthirsty and desperate devil, glided into the thickets beyond the cove, and stole along the dark shades down the Rio Brazos; murder in his heart, and the ruin of a beautiful maiden in his mind. And thus we leave him; liking not his company, and seeking it not, except as far as it concerns those for whom we have kindly feelings, whose lives are put in jeopardy by the chief of all dastardly assassins.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRST MOVE.

BUT little sleep visited the eyes of Rosa Ray, after leaving Roy and regaining her chamber; and no wonder was it, for she was of an exceedingly nervous temperament, and the experience of the previous evening, and of the greater part of the eventful night, were such as to keep her in thought and motion for some time, regardless of fatigue.

Such short periods of somnolence as she now and then sunk into, were troubled by dreams that were torturing; all bearing upon Roy Randolph, who, in her visions, was continually in danger from some dread cause.

The happiness she had felt when in his presence, since he had declared his love, seemed too blissful to continue; and when he bade her good-night, and vanished from her view in the dark shades, the most harrowing apprehensions became hers. She now feared that the cowardly enemy, who had attempted his life, would again discover that Roy had escaped, and be at once on his track.

From entertaining these distracting thoughts, Rosa's dreams were of much the same character.

It was quite late in the morning, when the Belle of the Brazos, not having made her appearance at the usual hour, was summoned by her maid to breakfast; and Rosa was worried by her own delay, as well as being fearful that her father and aunt might notice her haggard appearance, and be somewhat inquisitive in consequence.

That any suspicions should be entertained by them, in regard to the past night's experiences of their darling, was simply absurd; but it was natural for the child-like Rosa, who had never before ventured from the house at such an hour, and whose adventures had been so startling and remarkable, to think that it was impossible for such events to occur, and none of her people know aught in regard to them.

Besides this, her conscience troubled her greatly; for not only had she formed an intimate acquaintance with a young man, but he and she had exchanged mutual vows of love and constancy.

Rosa well knew that her father would be frantic, perfectly furious, did he know but a very slight portion of that which had occurred; and that aunt Roxie would in all probability, be immediately seized with spasms, if not paralyzed. Under these circumstances, she felt very much relieved at knowing that her father had eaten an early breakfast, and had ridden out into the cotton and corn fields, to superintend the gathering of the same; it being the busiest time of the year.

Consequently Rosa and her aunt were the only ones at the breakfast table; and, as the Venetian blinds were closed, to exclude insects, thus darkening the room, the tired and worried appearance of our heroine was not noticed by her relative. Rosa was not as much disposed to conversation as usual, either, but she forced herself into assumed joyous spirits, when she perceived that her aunt was observing her depression.

The meal passed off, however, without any serious annoyance to Rosa, and she also got through reciting her lessons to her aunt with much more credit than she had anticipated; she being surprised that a single idea or thought, beyond those that were connected with Roy, had been retained.

Her lessons being over, and others assigned her, our heroine hastened through the gardens and magnolias to the landing. And her faithful dog, Hero—so aptly named—was not forgotten; for Rosa called him from his napping-place, and after feeding him with some delicacies from her own almost untasted breakfast, she proceeded to arrange a bed of leaves near that of the pet fawn, Lulu, and bade him lie there, while she patted him lovingly, and spoke words of commendation and praise.

The intelligent animal seemed to comprehend why these unusual attentions were bestowed upon him, and that the past night's expedition had been the means of forming a new bond between him and his young mistress.

But the attention of Rosa was not long given to her pets; for, not only was she extremely sleepy and fatigued, but every movement gave her pain, as she had exerted herself quite beyond her strength, and had walked much further than ever before at one time. She felt that she would be more composed, and could sleep if she was in her hammock; and, with this idea, she had soon taken possession of it, and was swinging slowly in the balmy perfumed air, and wooing the drowsy god.

She had not been long thus, when a thought of the hideous face, she had seen in the tree on the opposite side of the Brazos flashed upon her mind; and instinctively she turned her head in that direction.

Suddenly her eyes dilated, the rich blood dyed her cheeks, and mingled joy, relief, and astonishment were imprinted upon her fair face, as she sprung to a sitting posture, her gaze fixed upon a most unexpected and most welcome tableau.

It was nothing else than the handsome form of Roy Randolph, who emerged from the undergrowth at the very instant that Rosa bent her gaze over the river; he, undoubtedly, having viewed the landing, and decided that it would be safe thus to venture, and relieve Rosa of the doubts she had expressed on the previous night, in regard to his safety, if he advanced up the river. For a moment only did he stand thus exposed, holding a pair of oars over his head, with one hand, and pointing down the river with the other. Then, throwing a kiss,

he stepped backward, and disappeared in the undergrowth.

From this pantomime, Rosa knew that Roy was now on his way to recover the two boats; this again giving her cause for apprehension, as he would be forced to swim the river, and she had not forgotten that dreadful alligator.

She was satisfied that Roy had been up the river to the cove from whence he had been sent adrift, and had there recovered his own oars, which had probably been secreted by the villain who had sought his life, but she knew he had not been to his home, as the time would not admit of such a journey, even at headlong speed. Besides he was still without a hat.

The young girl understood the object of her lover in thus exposing himself, and she rejoiced that he had relieved her mind. At length she came to the conclusion that he meant to form a raft of deadwood, upon which to cross the river, and this banished her fears for his safety. She then sunk into a deathlike slumber, from which she was awakened by the dinner-horn, and, not until evening approached, did she again repair to the landing, as her recitations and reading to her aunt, occupied the entire interval until then.

Rosa felt positive that Roy would not row up the river with the boats until darkness would hide his movements. That as he had been deprived of sleep the previous night, he would slumber during a part of the day in his boat; therefore, she did not have any anxiety from being forced to spend the afternoon with aunt Roxie.

She had romped and frolicked with her father when the latter came in from the fields to his dinner; in fact, she showed much more life and spirit than usual, to please the parent who idolized her, for she was greatly troubled because she had disobeyed his frequently-repeated commands in regard to forming the acquaintance of any of the young men in the neighborhood.

As a matter of course no anxiety was entertained by Captain Ray in this respect when his daughter was at home at the Bend, consequently he had not the remotest idea that any man had or would visit his plantation without being observed by himself or the servants. It was certain that none could, unless screened by the timber, or by boat on the river, and there were but few boats on the Brazos at the time of which we write, and those few owned by the most wealthy planters.

Just before sunset Rosa repaired to the landing, but as Roy had made no appointment with her until the next evening, she decided that she would not risk remaining longer than usual.

Roy evidently did not intend to waste time or to leave an opening for discovery by her people, and intended to go to his own home during the night.

She fortunately had another pair of oars, and if the absence of the pair she had been using was noticed, she could say that they must have fallen from her boat and drifted away, although she hoped there would be no occasion for her to say anything on the subject.

Returning to the house she sat with her father while he enjoyed his evening pipe, her aunt having retired early. An hour later all were in their beds, but Rosa had not gone to sleep, for she had determined to repeat her visit to the landing to ascertain if Roy had left her boat. But this time she prayed that she might be drawn into no such dread experiences as on the previous evening.

She had been quite anxious during the afternoon, fearing that aunt Roxie would propose a walk to the landing, as she sometimes did, and notice that the boat was gone, and she felt very thankful that the day had passed without any one having discovered its absence. She had taken her reserve oars down to the landing at her evening visit without having been seen by any one.

For full an hour after her return our heroine waited; then, as all was silent in the mansion, she stole stealthily down the stairs through the hall and out upon the veranda. She then stepped to the garden path and walked slowly toward the magnolias, in order if any one did observe her from the windows that they would suppose her to have no object in view, except a short promenade in the cool night air.

As on the previous night, Hero followed close behind her, wagging his tail in his delight at being near his young mistress.

A strange and indefinable feeling of dread, for which she could not account, oppressed Rosa as she entered the dark shades of the bottom timber, but she finally attributed the feeling to a nervous doubt in regard to Roy's having safely crossed the river, secured the boats, and rowed up-stream.

If her boat was in its usual place, she reasoned, this feeling would vanish.

The moon shone brightly, as on the previous night, silvering the river, and Rosa, gazing through the foliage upon the sheen of waters, as she descended the decline to the landing, felt her eyes blinded by it to such an extent, that she could not for a moment distinguish, in the semi-darkness of the cove, whether the boat was there or not. However, she went on until the

outlines of the little skiff were discernible, and felt great relief; for she now knew that Roy had passed another day in safety, and was rowing up the river to a point as near his home as was possible, and from which he could take horse to his plantation.

As the young girl stood on the platform, she noticed, with some astonishment, that the oars which she had brought down on her previous visit, and placed in a thicket near the bank, were in the boat.

This puzzled Rosa, for she did not understand why Roy should have put himself to this trouble, unless with a purpose. Could it be possible that he wished to have her step into the boat? That he had left a note for her in the skiff, which he feared she would not notice unless he placed the oars in a position where they would be liable to fall into the water if a breeze sprung up, and which he felt assured she would notice if she came to the landing?

Most certainly the oars were in a position where they would be easily knocked overboard by a movement of the boat, and Rosa decided that she was right in her surmise—Roy must have left a letter for her!

Stepping forward to the edge of the platform, our heroine stooped to grasp the rope and draw the skiff toward her; but at this instant she heard a low growl, mingled with the rush of something through the air, and then a horrible sound, as of some hard substance striking and crushing through bones.

All this was in an instant. The next, as she sprung upright and turned in terror, a strong arm encircled her, binding her own arms tightly to her side, while a gag was thrust into her mouth!

She was quickly bound and her eyes blinded by a kerchief before she had caught a view of the assaulter, she being able to catch but a faint outline of the form of a man.

Her blood ran chill, her tongue seemed paralyzed, and a deathly faintness almost overcame her as she was lifted into and laid in the bottom of her own boat.

She knew that the skull of her faithful dog had been crushed by the fearful blow, and that she was a captive; but to whom?

"Who, in Heaven's name, could the miscreant be?"

"How dare he?"

"What would her poor father do now?"

"Where was Roy?"

"What was to become of her?"

These questions Rosa asked herself mentally, and then she heard the sound of the oars, and knew that she was being rowed upon the river; but, whether up or down, she could not tell.

Little had she thought that she was fated to take another ride on the river so soon—that her position would be many times worse than on the previous night!

Then the thought flashed upon her that the same dastard who had sent Roy Randolph adrift, and afterward attempted his life by shooting him, that he, the man of the hideous face that she had seen in the tree, was her abductor.

She was, then, in the power of an inhuman, merciless fiend; a murderer, an assassin!

This so overpowered the poor girl, that she became faint, and then fainter; finally sinking into insensibility. This relieved, for a time, the terrible torture of mind engendered by her position—a position most appalling, and apparently hopeless!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PLOT AND ITS ACCOMPLISHMENT.

UPON discovering that Louis Le Grand had escaped from his position in the hanging jariat, which Roy had supposed to be impossible for him to do, in his apparently weak condition, our hero and the young men who accompanied him, returned to the camp and buried old Dan. They then kindled a fire, and all partook with a relish, of the juicy steaks cut from the bear.

They well knew that it would be impossible to trace the miscreant at night, and so made the best of their disappointment.

The horses were relieved of their equipments, and staked in an opening to graze; and then all, except Roy Randolph, lay down upon their blankets, and sunk quickly to sleep.

In the morning, our hero, who had guarded the sleeping men, he being secreted in an adjoining dark thicket, proceeded down the bank of the cove, in search of his oars. These he found among the reeds, and he also discovered the trail of Le Grand, on the opposite side of the cove, which he followed. He decided that, after the villain's escape, he had proceeded at once to the camp, and there had doubtless heard all that had been said about him.

Indeed, there could be no mistake in this respect, as the "sign" was more fresh than that which had been made in the evening, besides being on the east side of the cove; and it showed a stealthy, creeping approach.

This was told to the young men on their awakening; and, after a breakfast of bear-steak, they all repaired to the thicket on the bank of the river, and from which Le Grand had fired his rifle at Roy. The gun was secured

from the river, and this more fully confirmed Roy's assertions.

Reasoning that as the wretch had become aware of their intentions through listening at the camp, Roy now proposed that the party should at once repair to the plantation of Le Grand and endeavor to effect his arrest, while he himself volunteered to proceed down the river in search of any trace of his enemy. Our hero's intention, however, was principally that of returning the boat of Rosa Ray; he never dreamed that Le Grand would proceed on foot down the Brazos, as it seemed probable that the villain would return at once to his home, secure what money he could, and leave that part of the country forthwith.

As the reader already knows, Roy was successful in returning Rosa's skiff without being observed. He then rowed up the river to the place where he had left his horse when he started on his fishing-trip the previous morning.

The horse of Le Grand he gave in charge of one of the young men who went to the plantation of the former.

Upon reaching his horse, Roy hurriedly equipped himself and galloped directly to his home. He arrived thither before daylight and at once prepared for a long ride to the Bend on the following afternoon; selecting for the journey his best horse, an animal of great speed and endurance, keeping him in the stable in place of being driven with the herd to graze by the slaves.

His preparations being finished, the young man went to his chamber and slept during the forenoon; starting after dinner to keep his appointment with Rosa, after which he intended to search for Le Grand. By this time a messenger from the young men who had gone to the plantation reported that the miscreant had not been there and had not been seen by any one.

Leaving Roy galloping toward the Brazos and filled with blissful anticipations in connection with the interview he was looking forward to, we will return to the missing scoundrel, Louis Le Grand.

Le Grand at first, after realizing his peril, was unable to arrive at any conclusion as to his future movements, and, secreted from any possibility of being discovered, he plunged into deep thought.

He had three objects in view which he was resolved that he would accomplish.

First, he had sworn that Rosa should be his, and he meant to keep that oath.

Secondly, he had also vowed to have his so far mysteriously-thwarted revenge upon the man he so deeply hated. Roy Randolph must die!

Thirdly, he himself must escape from the vicinity as soon as possible.

He must abandon his plantation, but this did not affect him to any very great extent, for it was mortgaged for its full value, as were also the season's crops and nearly all of the slaves, for, while on protracted sprees of late, he had lost heavily at cards and horse-racing.

And now it was that he congratulated himself upon anticipating such a time as the present, as for many months he had been intending to shoot Roy Randolph, and he knew that he might meet the latter when he himself was under the influence of liquor and shoot him in a cowardly manner. In that case, the deed being probably witnessed, his life would be placed in jeopardy.

Not this alone, but he was liable when half-crazed with drink to wager everything he had in the world and lose it.

Consequently he had some time since prepared himself for these contingencies by giving a bill of sale of his wagons, mules, and other personal property, together with several slaves, to his overseer. This had been done in a legal manner, two witnesses signing the document. Both these men were of the hunting-party, his ex-comrades, who were now seeking his life.

His overseer, however, knew nothing of this transaction, Le Grand retaining the papers for obvious reasons until the same were needed.

He now made up his mind that he would abduct Rosa Ray, fly up the Brazos with her, and there secrete her in the timber, while he repaired stealthily to his home, but a pistol-shot from the bottom.

He would then seek his overseer, who was a man after his own heart, and completely under his influence through his knowledge of a crime the man had some time ago committed, and give him the bill of sale. This he would do in order that no one could prevent his departure with such valuables as he chose to transport to a new section. To do this, the overseer must at once load up, and start off in the night; making away from the river, over the open country to the Rio Colorado. He must cross this at Columbus, and go from thence northwesterly to San Antonio, keeping as far as was possible away from frequented trails.

As for himself, he would gallop ahead with Rosa Ray, and lie in wait for the wagons. Then, in the night-time when the negroes would be asleep, the girl could be secreted in the lead-

ing wagon, where the overseer could prevent her being discovered by the other drivers.

By carrying out this programme he would escape from his enemies, avenge himself partly on Roy Randolph by stealing the maiden with whom he felt positive Roy was in love, and gain a bride who, in time, would prove a mine of wealth to him.

The spirit of the girl he meant to break; he would cause her every kind of mental anguish, and then, when she realized that she was lost to all the world, she would gladly be his wife.

If pursuit was made, he felt that he could evade the pursuers; and, if necessary, hasten to the Rio Grande.

If Roy Randolph pursued him, he would then have an opportunity to fill his cup to the brim with vengeance, by killing him in the presence of Rosa Ray.

All this having been evolved in the miscreant's mind, he stole through the thickets, down the river; crouching low, as the searching-party passed back to the camp.

Knowing now that the coast was clear, he proceeded to more open ground, and walked until nearly opposite Bend Plantation. Then he fastened together a number of drift-logs, procured a long pole, and, after much difficulty, succeeded in gaining the opposite bank. There he secreted himself in a dense thicket, just as the gray streaks of coming dawn shot up eastward, threw himself upon the earth, quite exhausted, and fell into a deathlike slumber, which lasted until long after the sun had passed the meridian.

Le Grand awoke in a most demoralized state of mind, having eaten nothing since the morning previous to his camping with his comrades on the hunt—that morning when old Dan lay dead, murdered by him before the meal was cooked.

With insane nervousness and anxiety he clapped his hand to his hunting-shirt pocket, pulled out his flask, and, finding it nearly full, recalled the fact that he had cast away the other one, and had taken this from his saddlebags just previous to his plunge into the river. Having imbibed pretty freely, he felt like another man, and he then crawled to the river, casting cool water over his face and head.

All the plans he had formed were now reconsidered; and he sat in the thicket until near sunset, when he cautiously approached the Bend, keeping near the bank, and screened in the undergrowth.

Eventually the miscreant reached a position near the landing, where he could easily overlook it; and he there, to his rage and astonishment, perceived Roy Randolph now up the Brazos in the twilight, leaving the boat of Rosa and then going on up the river.

It was with great difficulty, bringing to the front all his strength of will, that Le Grand could refrain from drawing his revolver and sending a bullet through Roy's heart at close range; but he knew that the report would alarm the Rays, and defeat his plans. Probably, indeed, it would be the means of ending his own career, as the bloodhounds would be put upon his track.

The face of Le Grand was filled with relief, as his gaze returned from watching Roy to the landing, the sight of the boat causing this change.

He had been greatly puzzled in regard to the manner in which he should bear Rosa away, should he secure her, having meditated stealing a horse from Captain Ray as well as the daughter. But now Roy Randolph had brought just what he most desired—a boat, which he would use to convey his captive up the Rio Brazos.

By what means Roy got possession of this boat was a mystery; but upon thinking over the events of the near past, and considering that Roy had his own boat as well, Le Grand arrived at a reasonable solution of the puzzle.

He had shot Roy, and in place of the bullet penetrating the skull of his enemy it had glanced along the same, rendering him senseless. He had thus floated down the river, and, without doubt, had been seen and rescued by Rosa Ray.

Both had then walked to the Bend, leaving their boats, fearing to row up the moonlit river, as they might be discovered together, thus compromising Rosa.

If what Le Grand surmised had been the case, Rosa Ray must have been at the landing nearly three hours after sunset, when all at Bend Plantation were asleep; and there was a possibility of her visiting the landing late this night of all nights—to him who now crouched in the thicket.

The time seemed long to Le Grand that he lay thus like a wild beast watching for its prey, the hours passing so slowly as to seem days to him; and had there not been an ample supply of liquor in his flask, he would doubtless have given up his plan for that night and hastened to his plantation.

However, the Evil One favored him; for, as the reader knows, Rosa Ray, unable to sleep, proceeded to the landing to ascertain if Roy had arrived from down the river and had left her boat.

Finding the oars in a thicket at the landing, Le Grand placed them, as we have seen, in the skiff in a careless position, arguing that the maiden would draw the boat to the platform in order that she might secure them. When at length she did appear, the extreme nervousness of the wretch nearly betrayed him.

He had provided himself with a club, that he might defend himself against any dog that might scent him; and we have seen how poor Hero fell, a victim to his fidelity and watchfulness.

The further proceedings of the villain have already been detailed; and having accomplished his dastardly deed, by depriving a fond father of an only child, he bent to the oars, the boat cutting the waters of the Rio Brazos once more.

Rosa Ray lay again senseless in her little skiff, while her father lay peacefully sleeping, as she was being borne over the silvery sheen of waters, the captive of a merciless fiend—reserved for a fate a hundred-fold worse than death!

CHAPTER XVII.

"MY DAUGHTER! OH, MY DAUGHTER!"

WHEN Roy Randolph left his plantation, he went immediately toward the river-road, which led to and past Bend Plantation to the Gulf, and having dispatched a messenger to the young planters who had been the associates of Le Grand, he awaited, as soon as he reached the road, the arrival of these men, intending to confer with them in regard to a further search for the miscreant.

He had but a few moments to wait before the expected party made their appearance around a turn in the road, galloping toward him; but, as he gazed in their direction, he discovered a man riding toward him at headlong speed, and shouting like a maniac.

The young man was filled with apprehension.

Had Le Grand committed another fiendish crime?

This question Roy asked mentally, but there was no time for speculative thought, as both the party of young planters and the single horseman from down the river galloped up at the same time. He then recognized the lone rider as the overseer of Bend Plantation, and the recognition caused a strange pang to pass through his heart, like a thrust from a knife.

He cried out at once:

"In Heaven's name, Bob Williams, what has occurred? Are you drunk or mad?"

The man seemed at first unable to speak. He was evidently laboring under the most intense excitement and deep concern, these feelings being plainly expressed upon his flushed face, which was covered with perspiration, as was his panting horse with foam.

Roy and the young planters stared at him in astonishment, not unmixed with apprehension. But in a moment, in a voice that had been made hoarse with yells, cried out:

"Gentlemen, I come from Bend Plantation for help! Miss Rosa Ray was lost last night—stolen from her home, abducted, and has been carried no one knows where!"

"Great God!" exclaimed Roy Randolph, in a voice so changed that all turned and looked at him.

For a moment our hero gazed into the eyes of the overseer with a fixed stare; then he yelled:

"Men, follow me! Louis Le Grand, the coward, the murderer, the assassin, has stolen the Belle of the Brazos! Follow me to vengeance!"

"Lead on, Roy! Lead on!"

And before these outcries died away nothing was to be seen down the road except a cloud of dust; nothing was heard except the clatter of hoofs. Roy Randolph and his new followers were on the trail for revenge and Rosa Ray.

Our hero had intimated that the looks and actions of Williams, the overseer, indicated a tendency toward either excessive drinking or insanity; but Williams, as he sat his horse, gazing down the road, seemed at that moment the most dumfounded man on earth. The overseer would have been willing to swear that Roy and the young planters were all stark staring maniacs. Their manner and actions proved this, as well as their words.

Knowing that Randolph was a good trailer, and that he had a sufficient number of men with him to attend to Le Grand when caught, Williams felt that his mission was at an end, and he hastened to the nearest plantation to get a fresh mount, and then return to the Bend.

On the morning after the abduction of Rosa Ray her father arose early, and, as on the previous morning, proceeded to the fields to superintend the gathering of the crops.

Aunt Roxie was somewhat later, and when Rosa failed to make her appearance as before, her aunt, recalling the fact that the maiden had overslept herself the previous morning, concluded that she had studied and romped too much of late, and was in consequence not really well. This caused her to instruct the maid to allow Miss Rosa to sleep on for an hour longer—an order that she regretted very much afterward.

When the time prescribed did arrive, aunt Roxie was in her easy-chair on the veranda, and was as much startled as when she had been awakened by her niece on a former occasion. The maid rushed to the door and thence to the feet of aunt Roxie where she fell upon her knees, trembling violently, and making ineffectual efforts to speak.

"Bless my soul, Chloel!" exclaimed Miss Roxie in astonishment, "what in the name of wonder ails you? Do speak! You frighten me!"

At last Chloel burst forth in an agonized voice: "Missy Rosa—Oh, Lordy! What'll ole Mars' Richard say an' do? Missy Rosa done gone, Miss Roxie—she not in de cham'ber. Oh, Lordy! Oh, Lordy, Lordy!"

Miss Ray arose stiffly from her chair, pallid and speechless for a moment, then she cried out:

"Get up, Chloel! Get up this moment, and run to the landing! I dare say your young mistress has gone out unobserved by us, and is in her hammock. I know she must be, and the dog is with her, of course; indeed, I have not seen Hero all the morning."

Before speaking thus, the thought that gave birth to the words passed through her mind, and she felt greatly relieved. Her manner and appearance changed, and this banished much of the fright and apprehension of Chloel, who now sprung to her feet and darted through the gardens toward the landing, disappearing in the timber.

The face of aunt Roxie was a study at this time, but not an agreeable one; as a second thought led her to decide that her niece would not have gone to the landing without informing her.

A suspicion of something too terrible for thought took possession of her mind, and when, soon after the disappearance of Chloel, she heard the horrified shriek of the latter, the poor old lady staggered forward, clutching at a post of the veranda; but her hands beat the air, she seemed to be stricken blind, and she sunk senseless to the floor. The terrified Chloel darted from the magnolias with loud screams, springing in mad trides over the garden path as if the devil and all his imps were close behind her.

Reaching the veranda, she found that Miss Roxie lay there, apparently dead. This was too much for Chloel. She rushed out through the back door of the mansion, shrieking as she went, and shot into the cabin of Aunt Dinah, the cook, overturning the latter, and crawling under a table. There she lay, regardless of the pan of water which the old negress threw over her, as soon as the latter regained her feet.

In an instant the kitchen was filled with negro women and children, who gathered from the row of cabins a short distance away. When Chloel recovered her speech she cried out:

"Run, some of you no 'count niggers, an' tell ole mars' dat Miss Rosa am gone, an' ole mist' am dead! Dat's all de good Lor's trufe, sure an' sartin!"

Then followed a scene of confusion. A dozen little darkies fled to the fields for Captain Ray, each eager to be the one to bear the astounding news, but all of them too frightened to truly realize its appalling significance.

Aunt Dinah rushed into the house, bidding some of the wenches to follow; but when she discovered Miss Roxie and turned to give orders, she found that she was alone.

Springing through the window, the old cook procured camphor, cologne and smelling salts, in quick time; and soon had Miss Ray in her chair, partially recovered, but still speechless.

The frightened servants, looking on from a distance, perceiving that their mistress lived, now hastened to offer their assistance.

Just then the captain dashed up at headlong speed, crushing flowers and shrubs in his course, his face ghastly and terrible.

Jerking his steed to a halt opposite his sister, he strove to speak, but only a spasmodic gurgling sound left his trembling lips; and Aunt Dinah, to whom Chloel had spoken of what she had seen at the landing, being also unable to articulate, pointed significantly toward the river.

Down the long path to the magnolias shot the captain, quickly disappearing from view.

A moment more and the overseer and field hands came on the run, the finger of Aunt Dinah directing them also to the landing; and on they sped, not daring to believe that their young mistress, the beauty and belle of the Brazos, was gone, none knew whither!

Aunt Dinah, seemingly the only one who retained a fraction of judgment or sense, directed the house-servants to search the rooms, one and all; she herself striving in vain to revive aunt Roxie, but the old lady kept her eyes fixed on the magnolias, at the end of the path, the expression of her face proving that she expected to see the corpse of poor Rosa being conveyed, at any moment, toward her home.

Chloel had no sooner rushed down the path to the landing than she darted back again; for not only did she see that the boat of her young mistress was gone, but she discovered Hero, his head crushed and bloody—sufficient proof that Miss Rosa had been carried away in her own skiff, most certainly during the night, or the

dog would not have accompanied her to the landing.

Captain Ray saw the same, and came to the same conclusions at once.

He knew, as soon as he perceived that Hero had been killed, that his darling had been abducted; besides, her boat was not in its place.

When Williams, the overseer, rode up, the captain had dismounted and held in his hand the club which, without doubt, had been used in killing the dog. He gazed at this for a moment, then at Hero, and then at the surface of the cove, where the boat ought to have been; then he sunk upon his knees, the tears running down his furrowed cheeks, while he cried in deep supplication, clasping his hands:

"Oh, God in heaven, protect, preserve my darling! Give me strength to bear up under this fearful blow! Give her strength until these old arms can again clasp her—until I shall punish the miscreant, avenge this terrible outrage, and save her from shame and death!"

Then he arose to his feet, changed in everything. A merciless thirst for revenge was imprinted upon his features; a resolution manifested that could be lessened or broken only by his death. Anguish the most agonizing was stamped upon his face as he said to his overseer:

"Williams, my child, my Rosa has been stolen from me, and from her home! Send out some of the servants on each side of the river, up and down stream, to search for her and the skiff. Then jump the best horse, and gallop for aid up the river!"

"Tell Roy Randolph to come, for he is a good trailer. My child, my darling must be avenged! I swear to rend the villain limb from limb who has stolen her! I shall go mad!"

"See, Williams, there lies our faithful Hero—dead! His skull has been crushed by that club, and the boat, too, is gone. That proves that my Rosa has been carried away against her will. Oh, God! sustain me, or I shall go mad!"

To describe the scenes that followed, and continued through the day at Bend Plantation would be useless. The wail of the negroes could be heard on all sides, at all times; and Captain Ray rode here and there, like a madman, his judgment completely warped by his overpowering grief.

But there was no trace of Rosa Ray.

The water left no trail, and the negroes saw nothing of the boat.

And thus, in hopeless despair and deepest anguish, on the very borders of insanity, Roy Randolph and his companions found Captain Ray, as upon panting, foam-flecked steeds, they galloped into the Bend, the expression of Roy's face making it scarce recognizable.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WESTWARD HO!

WHEN Roy Randolph and the ex-comrades of Louis Le Grand galloped madly up to Bend Plantation, the captain was at the landing by himself; it was the last spot in which he knew his darling to have been, and he wished to be there for a time in solitude.

Not the slightest trace or trail had been found, and the brain of the poor old man seemed to be bursting.

Springing from their panting horses, and securing the animals to the veranda posts, the new arrivals hurried to the landing, directed thither by old Dinah, Miss Roxie having taken to her bed, in a most deplorable state of mind.

Roy rushed wildly down the path, his heart bleeding, his brain like molten lead, as he dashed around the thicket where Rosa Ray had been folded in his arms. Her beautiful, confiding, innocent face, and her girlish, graceful form had been ever before his eyes; her hands stretched out pleadingly, and her limpid eyes filled with tears.

And now Le Grand, the demon, the miscreant, was dragging her away.

This true picture of the present state of things nearly drove the young man distracted. It was especially torturing to him when he remembered that he himself had been the means, indirectly, of all this misery—that had he not fallen asleep in his boat, all the chain of dread events would not have occurred. The fact that he had been blessed by becoming acquainted with, and loved by Rosa, through the strange happenings of the past day and night, did not lessen the last unlooked-for, too terrible to contemplate occurrence; as he believed that he would eventually have known and loved Rosa Ray under more favorable circumstances.

When Roy reached the landing, Captain Ray was seated on the platform, his face buried in his hands. Roy realized that he must control his own feelings, and concentrate his whole mind on ferreting out the course that Rosa had been taken, and the pursuit of the wretch who had torn her from her home. He regretted then, more than it was possible for him to express, that he had saved the Dastard from the jaws of the alligators.

No one seemed to have any judgment, or to have pursued any reasonable plan of rescuing Rosa, and our hero braced himself, a stern, determined and revengeful expression mingled

with the anguish and concern which he could not banish entirely, and the depth and intensity of which he knew had surprised the young men who accompanied him.

"Captain Ray," he called out in a firm, clear voice, as he sprung upon the platform, "allow me, as a neighbor and friend, to express my deepest sympathy in this most severe blow that has fallen upon you, and to say that I am yours to command—that your daughter must and shall be restored to you, and that Louis Le Grand, who has abducted her, shall be hanged like a dog!"

Captain Ray sprung to his feet as if aroused from a deep sleep, astonishment merging into relief, and this again into amazement and wonder, to hear a new arrival assert the name of his daughter's abductor when not a soul at the Bend had the slightest suspicion in regard to it.

Carried away by force all knew that she had been, as the body of the dog and the missing boat but too clearly proved.

"Louis Le Grand!" almost shrieked the old man, as he grasped the extended hand of Roy Randolph.

"In the name of wonder, how do you know that Le Grand has stolen my child?"

"Thanks, gentlemen, all, for your kindness and proffered services! I am not in a fit condition of mind to reason in regard to this terrible affair."

In a few words Roy revealed the vaunt and wager of Le Grand at the hunting-camp, and also that the ruffian had twice very recently sought his life. But he said nothing of his having been saved by Rosa or his having met the latter; he stated, however, that he knew when he was searching for the man who had attempted to assassinate him, that that man—Louis Le Grand—had gone down the Brazos, and from a tree had inspected the landing where they themselves now were. An examination, he suggested, of the opposite side of the river would reveal plain "sign" to substantiate this.

"Good heavens!" wailed Captain Ray, "my poor little Rosa in the power of a brutal and merciless assassin: and he, too, on the borders of delirium from drink! Gentlemen, for the love of mercy give me some hope! Where has he taken her? Will he harm her? What can be his object?"

"But I ought not to ask—I dare not even think. My friends, I shall go mad if some trace of my child is not soon found. My cross is heavier than I can bear."

"What have you done, Captain Ray, toward the search?" asked Roy, quickly. "We must get to work at once, and that in a systematic manner."

"I have had my slaves search both sides of the river, up and down, for some distance. I cannot say how far they have been, for you cannot depend upon blacks in such an emergency as this. The sudden disappearance of my daughter, who was beloved by them all, is looked upon by them in a superstitious light, as they cannot be brought to believe that any human being could be so depraved as to harm her."

"Louis Le Grand has not gone up the river," said Roy, very decidedly. "It is unreasonable to suppose this, as he was well aware that we were all searching for him in the vicinity of the point from which he shot me, and the camp where he brutally murdered his old slave."

"He knew he was not safe at his plantation; that a rope was ready for his neck, and therefore he would go, if by boat, down the Brazos to the Gulf. From thence he could get passage, in some coaster, to a point where he would think himself safe. He would probably represent his captive to be an insane relative, or would smuggle her through in some cunning manner."

From this reasoning of Roy, all were convinced that the only course to pursue, with any hope of success, was down the Brazos: losing sight of the fact, that Le Grand, in all his late perfidious acts, had proceeded in a very unreasonable manner; and also that he had a most foolhardy and desperate way of returning, and loitering around the scenes of his crimes.

Having come, however, to this decision, Roy Randolph and his comrades, accompanied by Captain Ray, at once procured fresh horses, and proceeded down the river; examining, after reaching a reasonable distance, in a systematic manner, the bayous and coves. A dozen negroes were sent across the river, on a raft, to proceed in the same manner on the opposite side.

Thus they wasted precious time, which was taken advantage of by Le Grand; although it did seem the most sensible course for them to pursue.

In this way two days were spent, one of the young planters hastening headlong to the mouth of the Brazos, and there ascertaining that Le Grand had not been seen, and that no trace was to be discovered of him. Thus, they returned to Bend Plantation, on the second evening after their departure; all, except Roy, utterly dispirited and discouraged.

Then it was, that they were rendered frantic by their foolish expenditure of valuable time:

being informed by the overseer, who rode in hot haste up the river at the same time, that not only had Rosa's boat been found at a point near to Le Grand's plantation, but that the superintendent of the latter had left, with a train of wagons, in the early morning hours, immediately after Rosa had been abducted. He had taken with him—so it was said—the household effects and personal property of Le Grand.

Never were men more dumfounded and furious. They realized that, at the very time that they had met Williams, and had received from him the startling intelligence, Le Grand was on his way with his wagon train—with Rosa, doubtless, secreted in one of the vehicles—and was now far away to the westward, going at all speed; while they had gone eastward in their search.

However, it was some consolation to know the important facts gained through Williams; and, notwithstanding their fatigue and prostration, all partook of a hasty supper, and, with fresh horses, galloped on through the night. Captain Ray and Roy Randolph dared not even think of the two long days in which Le Grand had been hastening away, by a trail as yet unknown to them. If the Dastard had gone westward, toward San Antonio, he was now far beyond the Colorado, and near the Guadalupe.

Had the train crossed the Colorado at Columbus, and the Guadalupe at Gonzales, they were positive that Le Grand would, from the latter town, proceed at once to San Antonio.

Here, we must leave these determined avengers, who followed the trail like bloodhounds; their apprehension in regard to Rosa Ray, urging them to bend every energy, repudiating fatigue, hunger, and privation from sleep, and exchanging their fagged horses for fresh ones. Thus on, to save a beautiful maiden from a fate that was worse than death, and a broken-hearted father from despair and madness.

The report of Williams, and the recorded meditated plans of Le Grand have shown the reader the true line of proceeding carried out by the miscreant, assassin, and abductor.

Quite an amount of cotton was transported on some of the wagons to Columbus, and there disposed of; as were a number of horses and mules, furnishing in this way a considerable sum of money to Le Grand. The wretch was himself secreted in a wagon beneath his goods, when the train entered the town. The papers, which he had given to his superintendent, enabled the latter to dispose of the cotton and animals, and to give bills of sale without suspicion.

Rosa, poor girl, nearer dead than alive, was also secreted in a wagon, safe from discovery; goods being piled at either end, nearly to the tilt. The gag had been removed on her promise to make no outcry, but was returned to her mouth, when about to enter a settlement, or near a ranch.

The train, after crossing the Guadalupe, proceeded across the prairies, avoiding any traveled trail or ranch; Le Grand seeking in every way to evade pursuit. He bribed a Mexican at Gonzales, to await the appearance of any pursuers or inquirers after himself and his wagons; and then, to hasten, by a route mentioned, to his employer, with intelligence of the character and number of those who were on his trail.

Thus we leave pursued and pursuers, to meet them again, far from the scenes in which they were actors—far from the Rio Brazos and Bend Plantation.

CHAPTER XIX.

DOUBLE DAN.

THE sun is just at the western horizon line, shooting its sanguine, farewell rays upon prairie, chaparral, and woodland, darting arrows of light here and there through the Spanish moss, into a night camp in a small opening in the bottom timber of the Rio Medina, about two miles below Pleasanton Ford.

Six mule wagons are drawn up in a line, on the outer side of the "open" from the river; the harness of the animals has been placed with great care upon the wagon tongues, and the musical sound of bells near at hand indicates that the mules are in the mesquites, that stretch from the timber, over the plain toward San Antonio, some twelve miles away.

A villainous-looking white man, with travel-stained clothing, much the worse for wear, sits upon a saddle near the wagons; while, some twenty paces nearer the river, there is a fire, at which a negro is busy preparing the evening meal, his movements being hastened by the imperious orders and curses of the white man.

Four other negroes are busy mending broken harness, near the wagons, which are filled with plantation tools and house furniture.

The white man is the superintendent and tool of Louis Le Grand; and his features prove him to be a fitting associate for so dastardly an employer.

A flask lies in the grass at the feet of Double Dan, as this worthy is called, probably from his notoriety as a double-dealer and double-face,

and he frequently drinks from the same; his skin red, and his face bloated, proving that whisky is his favorite beverage, as well as that of his employer.

Double Dan is a man of large build, great strength, and brutal character; which last is proved by the terror of the negroes, as he poured volley after volley of the coarsest profanity at them.

He is evidently, just now, eagerly anxious for his supper, as the cook comes in for the largest share of the curses. However, Dan is doomed to wait longer than he dreams of before satisfying his appetite.

Not five minutes have the occupants of the camp been in the position we have described, when the tramp of galloping steeds and the whisking of bush and branch strike their ears. Double Dan sprang to his feet, placing his hand on the butt of his revolver. But he has no time to draw his weapon, for a magnificent horse bounds snorting from the timber directly to his front, and upon the horse—his face the picture of fury and determination—sat Roy Randolph. He held in his hand a cocked revolver, presented at the head of the ruffianly superintendent, while his voice rung out in clear tones that meant business:

"Up with your hands, Double Dan, or die in your tracks. Quick, or my bullet finds your brain!"

The red and bloated face of Dan became ghastly as he threw up his hands above his head, for he knew Roy Randolph too well to disobey him.

The negroes sprang to their feet at the first sounds of Roy's approach, but their countenances expressed no fear as they recognized him. Just the opposite; relief and gratification were there, for they all revered the young planter.

"Boys, get a lariat and bind Dan securely," ordered Roy, addressing the slaves. "Tie him fast to the hind wheel of the first wagon."

The blacks were dumfounded at this order, fearing death if they obeyed; but Roy again cried out:

"Do as I bid you, without hesitation! I am master here, and this scoundrel shall never abuse you again."

"I reckon them's my niggers, Roy Randolph," said Dan, with a whining snarl. "What in the devil's ther row? What does this hyer mean? I ain't no road-agent nor hoss thief!"

"You're a great deal worse, Double Dan," said our hero; "for they are generally daring men, and do their deeds openly, with their lives in their hands, and not in a sneaking and cowardly way."

"Seems ter me," growled Dan, "ye're a rushin' biz, an'll git yer huff inter hit, in deep. What 'thorerty yer gut ter run in on a peaceable cit'zen this yere way? What yer gut ag'in' me?"

This he said as the slaves bound him fast to the wagon-wheel.

"You emphasize the pronoun as though you were well aware that I had good and sufficient reasons to come down heavy on somebody," said Roy, as he replaced his revolver.

"When the parties arrive whom I wish to witness our confidential interview, then the mystery of this affair will be explained. Ah, here they come!"

As Roy spoke, the sounds of several horsemen crashing through the bush on his trail, were heard, and the next moment Captain Ray and the ex comrades of Louis Le Grand spurred into the camp. All gave a glad cry as they recognized Roy Randolph, who glanced significantly from them to the captive who was tied to the wheel.

No sooner did the captain perceive Dan than he sprang from his saddle in a perfect fury and bounded toward the wagon, drawing his bowie knife as he ran, and fairly shrieking:

"At last! At last we have him! Thank Heaven for this! Now, Double Dan, miscreant, dastard, where is my daughter? Speak quick, or, by the Eternal, I'll cleave you to the heart!"

A quick gesture given by Roy to the negroes caused them to spring forward and grasp the bridles of the horses. Then our hero dismounted and strode to the side of the captain, laying his hand on the arm of the old planter restrainingly.

Captain Ray was indeed a dangerous man; and no wonder. For long weary days and sleepless nights had they been on the trail, at times losing it; and then, to cap all, upon arriving at San Antonio, they had ascertained that some of the goods had been removed from the wagons and sold by Double Dan, the men who assisted in unloading asserting that there was no woman with the train, nor no white man except Dan.

This was readily believed by the pursuers, for only six wagons entered San Antonio. There were seven when they crossed the Guadalupe, consequently one had left the train at some point where the wheel-ruts would not be noticed. That this last contained Rosa Ray, and that Louis Le Grand accompanied the vehicle, all the pursuers were now positive. It may be readily supposed, then, that they were furious, as well as being worn by privations, anxiety and deferred hope.

Hence their almost ungovernable rage, when

they saw before them the tool and accomplice of Le Grand, who must know well where Rosa Ray was; he having undoubtedly arranged to meet his employer—the trip to San Antonio being made for the express purpose of leading the pursuers on a false trail.

However, Double Dan, although probably expecting to be overtaken, had not dreamed that the pursuers would dare treat him with violence, as they could not prove him to have known anything of the abducted maiden.

When Captain Ray rushed, knife in hand, toward him, Double Dan trembled with the most abject terror; his tongue refusing to articulate the yell that sunk to a gurgling sound in his throat. Dan was the color of a corpse, notwithstanding the quantity of whisky in his system; and no man ever felt more relieved than he, when Roy sprang forward, arresting the arm of the captain, and at the same time calling out:

"Hold, Captain Ray! Do not strike a man when he is helplessly bound!"

"Good heavens! Do you call that thing a man, Roy Randolph?" burst forth the old planter. "He is lower than the brutes. A sneaking coyote is far above him. He is a snake in the grass, but I'll stop his crawling. I'll end it here!"

"Not now, captain!" insisted Roy, coolly and firmly. "We have a use for him, as you will realize when you are less excited."

The other young men gathered near, all showing plainly their sentiments toward the captive. Since they had been on the trail, they had refrained from drink; and consequently, they had each day realized more fully the villainess of their former leader. They began to see that they had been led, step by step, lower and lower; that their minds had been gradually corrupted by Le Grand, and that, had not these late events occurred, they would probably have themselves ended in some crime, which would have outlawed them.

The consciousness that they were now engaged in a just and good cause, created in them feelings of self-respect that were long strange to them, and they were all eager to risk life itself to save the unfortunate maiden, and to assist the distracted father in bringing Louis Le Grand to punishment. Not one in the party was there, who had not resolved to take part in the lynching of the wretch; for he must die, or the lives of none of them would be safe.

Thus it was, that Double Dan found himself in a most perilous position, and he now resolved to save his own miserable life by betraying his employer; indeed, there was no alternative, for he felt assured that he would be hanged like a dog, if he hesitated in the least to reveal what he knew. He now strove to find words to answer the demand of Captain Ray, and they came at last in a trembling voice; the young planters watching him with a look of scorn and loathing, the negroes bewildered, but rejoiced at the discomfiture of their tyrannical master.

"Cap'n Ray," spoke Dan, "I hain't gut nothin' 'gin' yer, an' I don't reckon yer kin fotch anythin' crooked erg'in' me. I kerried on Le Grand's ranch, an' gut my pay by takin' his mules, an' wagons, an' niggers. That's squar', an' I hes ther papers ter show fer 'em. Es ter t'other matter, I sw'ar I c'd'n't say; but I hes my sp'icions thet Le Grand hes gut yer darter in ther wagon what he left ther train with, 'bout a day's drive b'low San Antonio."

"You're a liar, and if you speak falsely to me again, I'll split your craven, coward heart! You saw my daughter last night, before the wagon left the train."

"How in ther devil did yer know that?"

Double Dan had been thrown entirely off his guard, as Captain Ray had intended. The captain's assertion was without any grounds whatever, but it chanced to "hit the bull's-eye," and caused Dan to betray himself.

"Now, Dan," said Roy, "we have you! Don't try another word of deception, or you go up. We are desperate men, and we will stand no nonsense. Has Louis Le Grand in any way ill-treated Miss Rosa Ray, and where is he encamped now?"

The cold muzzle of our hero's revolver pressed the perspiring brow of Double Dan, as he asked these questions, causing the ruffian to cringe and become more ghastly, his limbs almost giving way beneath him.

Dan felt that hesitation or untruth would be his death signal, and he burst out quickly:

"Le Grand hain't hurted ther leetle gal. He's on ther squar' deal wi' her, 'tendin' ter Lev a priest pach 'em together. They're camped ter-night on ther San Miguel; or they sh'd be, es I war ter jine 'em ter morrer night."

"South or north of Pleasanton?" asked Roy, quickly.

"Noth; 'bout twenty mile from byer; an' I sw'ar I hopes yer'll choka Le Grand (ff this yearth, fer he'll blow my brains out fer blowin' on him. I never went back on a pard afore."

"If you had chosen honest men for pards," said Roy, "there would have been no occasion."

Then turning, he addressed himself to the young men:

"Gentlemen, a ride of twenty miles will enable us to release the young lady, relieving her

from the fearful torture and anxiety of mind that must be hers. Captain Ray and myself will take that gallop; but we cannot ask you, who have so nobly held to the trail until you are worn by fatigue and privation, to go with us.

"Rest here, for there are grass, food, and water in abundance. Guard this train until we return. We have no fear; we shall win, though we are but two in number. Rosa Ray shall be saved before another sunset, or Roy Randolph will be food for the wolves of San Miguel."

Each of the young planters sprung impulsively forward, grasping the hands of Captain Ray and Roy. They all vowed that they were determined to proceed to the San Miguel at any moment; all asserting, in strong language, that they would not linger on the trail until Rosa Ray was safe, and Le Grand swaying at the end of a lariat.

In five minutes more the horses were tearing the rich grass from the sod, and our friends were devouring a hearty supper; everything being arranged that they should depart in an hour toward the San Miguel—Double Dan accompanying them, a captive, and the negroes being left in charge of the train.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE TOILS.

PEN cannot portray the feelings of poor Rosa when she recovered consciousness, and, by the motion and the regular stroke of oars, realized that she was in her own boat, bound and gagged, and being taken, she knew not whither, by she knew not whom.

She had even been denied the power of sight, as well as of motion and speech, for a kerchief, which sickened her with the scent of vile whisky, was bound about her eyes.

The poor girl was dumfounded as well as filled with the most torturing apprehension and terror, and besides this, there was the thought of the terrible state of affairs at her home when her absence should be discovered. The grief and agony of mind which her father and her aunt Roxie would suffer, added to the consternation and anguish of Roy—forced, as he would be, too, to mask every feeling for her sake—all this nearly unsettled the maiden's mind.

In fact, continuous thinking in regard to the sufferings of those dear to her, occasioned by her mysterious disappearance, and her own probable peril, finally forced her into a dazed state, her overtaxed brain becoming benumbed.

The ceaseless movement of the oars, the splash of the waters—these, all the sounds that broke the awful stillness—seemed to last for days in place of hours to the poor sufferer, but finally she was lifted from the boat, felt herself being carried in the arms of her captor for some distance, and then realized that she had been placed upon the ground in a thicket.

She heard the crashing of brush as the villain who had killed poor Hero and torn her from her home hastened away, and left her, bound and helpless—the song of birds at length proving to her that it was daybreak.

How long she lay thus she knew not, but it seemed ages; her limbs and body pained her, her jaws seemed to have become fixed and rigid in the unnatural position in which they had been forced by the cruel gag. When again she heard the crashing of the bushes she felt relieved, although she dreamed not of rescue, but the presence of a human being near her was far preferable to the position of being alone in that thicket, where some wild beast, for aught she knew, might pounce upon and devour her.

Rosa could not believe, in her innocence, that a civilized human being lived who would murder her, and that there was a man so cowardly and depraved as to bind and gag her thus, was a bewildering puzzle to her.

She knew that two men now entered the thicket, for she heard whispers; then she was lifted and again carried some distance, when she heard the stamping of horses' hoofs and the rattling of harness. She next knew that she was placed in a wagon, being raised high by one man, then taken over some obstructions and lowered to a reclining position upon what seemed to be a soft couch.

Then the wagon rolled on, for what appeared to be days, although but hours, when at length it came to a halt, and a man crawled over the boxes, as she judged, in the wagon and removed the kerchief from her eyes, saying:

"Miss Ray, you are not to fear anything; you will not be harmed. We are taking you to Roy Randolph, as he cannot come to you without being insulted and repulsed by your father, who will be informed of your safety, and who can again enjoy your society when you are a happy wife—not before."

"If you will promise not to make any outcry, I will remove the gag. Nod your head, if you agree to this!"

Amazed and horrified, as was Rosa at the appearance of this man, and the tissue of falsehoods, as she knew them to be, which he uttered; so eager was she to be relieved of the torturing gag, that she immediately nodded her head in acquiescence.

"And, if I unloose your hands, you will be more comfortable; but I cannot do so unless

you promise that you will keep them in a natural position. You cannot escape, for you are secured by cords of rawhide, and they cannot be untied by your delicate fingers. If you could unloose them, however, escape would be impossible. Another nod, if you promise?"

Rosa nodded quickly. The eyes of the poor girl had been fastened upon the face of the man who bent over her from the time that the kerchief had been removed, with a fixed stare of terror and aversion.

She knew that she had never met this man or ruffian before; yet there was an indefinable something in connection with the features, the raven hair, the black pointed mustache and goatee, which caused her to think that she had seen him somewhere, under peculiar circumstances.

The black, snake-like eyes of this man, whose face was swarthy and most repulsive, glared gloatingly upon her, causing her to shudder, and to feel as one does who suddenly treads upon a serpent in the grass, and realizes that the loathsome thing is squirming and circling about his limbs.

With quick movements, the gag and cords about the maiden's wrists were removed. Then, pointing to a basket and a tin pail by her side, he said:

"There is food and coffee! You had better eat, for you will need all your strength to bear our long journey in this cramped way. I shall be forced, at times, to replace the gag, but only for an hour or so. Take things coolly, and all will be well in the end."

It was plain to Rosa that the smooth-tongued villain strove to appear at his best; except at moments when his exultation overweighed all else. But she had no time to study him or to expostulate; she could not even find words to express her feelings of indignation at her treatment, for she could not articulate. Her tongue seemed transformed to lead, and he, whom she now decided was her captor, disappeared over the bales and boxes, and the wagon rolled onward.

For a long time Rosa lay rubbing her wrists, and endeavoring to regain the use of her muscles, the face of her visitor being uppermost in her mind; when suddenly she started, a terrible shudder convulsing her frame.

She knew now where she had seen that horrid face.

It was the same of which she had caught a glimpse in the tree, across the Brazos, from the landing at the Bend, just after Roy had parted with her; and she felt positive that she was now in the power of the wretch who had, in so dastardly a manner, shot Roy Randolph. It was, it must be, Louis Le Grand, who had made a wager with his dissipated companions to form her acquaintance, and become familiar with her in a week's time.

"Oh, God, protect me!" These, the first words spoken since her capture, came in a hoarse whisper.

But we will not detail the harrowing sufferings of poor Rosa, during that terrible journey.

On and on, the wagon rolled; she not being permitted to look out, even when in camp.

She could hear the negroes, and she knew that there were several wagons, and that they passed over grass-grown plains, and along traveled roads; but she dared not try to conjecture the distance that she had been taken.

It seemed ages since her capture, and the journey appeared an endless one. The poor girl became haggard and thin in flesh; the only place from which she could look out of the wagon being in the bottom at the end of her mattress, where a space some six inches square gave air and allowed a view of the ground passed over or that directly beneath them as they journeyed.

The object of her being carried away was a mystery to poor Rosa, the only solution of which that she could arrive at was that, having failed to kill Roy, this miscreant had decided to avenge himself upon the enemy by abducting her, Le Grand having by spying ascertained that she and Roy Randolph loved each other.

Rosa was at length aware that a different driver had been assigned to the wagon, who was evidently a Mexican, for she could hear him curse and urge the mules on in Spanish, but that the vehicle which formed her prison was proceeding on by itself was soon apparent also, the sounds of the other wagons and the voices of the negro drivers no longer reaching her ears.

At length the poor girl was most agreeably surprised by having her limbs set free, and by being informed by her captor that when she could use her limbs she might climb out from the wagon and take a seat in the camp, as they would soon reach a point where they would be free from molestation or observation.

It was hours before the wagon came to a halt and yet Rosa was then unable to trust herself to walk, although she had been constantly rubbing her feet and ankles, and bathing them with water.

While thus engaged she had drifted into a new line of thought.

She had not during the long journey thought

of the probability that Roy Randolph would follow the trail or that her father would be able to ascertain by whom and where she was taken. Now, however, she reasoned that from the fact that Roy knew of Le Grand's boast and wagers in regard to her, he would be suspicious of his having had a hand in her abduction. Not only so, but she felt that it would be impossible for the wagon-train to leave the plantation of Le Grand—which she believed had been the starting point—without the fact being known; and, as this had probably occurred the day following her capture, everybody would conclude that Le Grand had carried her away.

She was now convinced that Le Grand knew this, and that therefore it was he had parted from the train, that the pursuers might be led in another direction. But she felt assured that Roy would follow and that he would find her.

No sooner did Rosa arrive at this conclusion than she felt like a far different being; hope taking the place of despair. When she gained sufficient strength to leave the wagon she perceived that they were encamped in a beautiful "open" in the timber, bedecked with Spanish moss, clinging vines, and gorgeous wild flowers.

The maiden felt that in justice to herself and those who very possibly might be following her she must eat and gain strength to at least take care of herself, should there be a dash made to bewilder and slay her captors, and save her.

With hope in her heart, she began at once to feel more natural and prayed fervently that her father and Roy might be directed on the right trail. She paid no attention—not the slightest—to Le Grand or to the Mexican driver, the latter of whom was preparing their supper; but both men were at the same time keeping a keen watch on her every movement, as she paced the cool and flower-strewn sod.

CHAPTER XXI.

NOT YET.

ROSA RAY paced back and forth in the camp on the San Miguel, her staggering gait showing that it would be some time before she fully recovered from the effects of the treatment she had received.

The torture inflicted by her captor had been almost equal to that practiced by savages, proving him what he really was—unworthy the name of a man.

Rosa, although pretending to take no notice of the two men, was intently watching their every movement and expression, as they conversed in low tones, at times casting glances toward her, but evidently satisfied that she could not escape, as indeed she was herself but too well aware.

The Mexican, who had driven the mules since the wagon in which she had been confined had parted from the train, was, judging from his appearance, a fitting comrade for Louis Le Grand.

The two now squatted by the fire, selfishly devouring their food like ravenous wolves, not having since the halt offered her the least morsel, and the poor girl shuddered as she saw the murderous knife which the Greaser flourished, with profuse threats against any who might pursue them.

Le Grand had taken the precaution to secure Rosa's wrists together at her back when he gave her permission to exercise in the open air, thus rendering her helpless, even though it might be possible for her to escape by making a dash into the undergrowth beneath the towering timber.

She longed—oh, so much!—to get a glimpse of the prairie over which they had traveled the past day, but not only was the camp inclosed by a wall of tall trees, but Le Grand had caused the wagon to be taken over the stream, as she well knew, for she had observed the rushing waters within two inches of the aperture in the wagon-bed.

This had placed the stream between them and any pursuers who might happen to be on their trail, and the Mexican had once, to her knowledge, crossed this stream and reported no one in view on the north plain. This decided Rosa that her captor was apprehensive of being followed.

She had not the slightest idea of imploring or demanding a return to her home, the very actions and countenance of Le Grand proving to her that she would be sneered at did she do so.

Thus far the miscreant had maintained a calm demeanor toward her, without the least show of excitement or anger, but from a study of his brutal face she knew that he was a desperate man—that his recent crimes, which had caused him to fly from the Brazos and to leave probably all his worldly possessions, had transformed him into a human hyena, a pitiless fiend!

Had the unfortunate maiden not suffered so much during her terrible journey, until her sensitive brain was benumbed, she would have been now tortured beyond endurance by the consciousness that she had been conveyed beyond the settlements, and that her captor undoubtedly intended to penetrate the savage wilds, from which her escape would be impossible.

Rosa had reached that sad mental condition

when nothing frightens or appalls, the sense of thought being blurred, as is sometimes the sense of sight or hearing. But there were moments when her clouded mind became clear, and the terrible past and hopeless, horrible future shot through her brain, almost plunging her into insanity.

Suddenly the two men arose from their feast, the Mexican again disappearing beyond the river, and this caused Rosa increased hope, as it indicated a strong suspicion in her captors that they were pursued.

Le Grand now spread a blanket, and, with an extravagant show of politeness, bade his fair captive to be seated. He then placed before her some food and coffee, saying, as he did so:

"Make yourself entirely at home, Miss Ray, for in the future, you must school yourself to be at home in my company, wherever we may chance to be. I apprehend that we shall be forced to lead a wandering life for some time to come, as there is no doubt in regard to your father and Roy Randolph seeking to regain the Belle of the Brazos.

"I may as well tell you that I tried my best to kill Roy before I set out with you on this weary pilgrimage. I also had the misfortune to kill an old slave of mine, and so the climate about the Brazos is a trifle unhealthy for me.

"If it be any satisfaction to you, I will say that your friends are already on the trail, but by leaving the train, I have misled them. However, should they become aware of this and close in on me, I promise you I will shoot Roy the first opportunity; then you will not, having no living adorer, make any great objections to marrying me.

"You see, I have been unfortunate in my bets of late, and there are only two ways for me to insure myself against poverty. The one is, by marrying a rich wife; and the other, to raise a bandit band, and levy toll on travelers, appropriating express-boxes and mail-bags.

"I have a strong inclination to do both, for I think after you have recovered from your journey, you will make a dashing queen of the road. In fact, I have been surprised at your fortitude. Your strength of will and command over yourself, have, under the circumstances, been most admirable."

For a moment Rosa Ray gazed at the speaker in the utmost bewilderment.

The cool, even tone in which he spoke, was more impressive than if he had addressed her in a furious passion. She knew that under that calm exterior there was a very hell of beast-like ferocity.

She saw this in his eyes, and helpless, and at the fiend's mercy as she was, she dared not speak.

The food before her remained untouched, while she sat pallid as death, despair and anguish imprinted upon her face, while she stared into the villainous countenance of her captor.

He seemed nervous under her gaze, evidently beginning to fear that she was in danger of losing her reason, and the more terrible words that he had intended speaking to crush out the last spark of hope in her bosom, remained unuttered. He rose quickly to his feet.

At that instant a peculiar whistle sounded over the San Miguel, causing the swarthy face of Le Grand to grow pale, and instinctively he clutched his revolver. He then dashed to his horse, which was feeding near, took a turn around the nose of the animal with the neck-ropes, and then springing astride, urged him into the stream and forded.

Rosa Ray was now alone in the camp, but she seemed paralyzed and unable to move, although her hands had been unbound to enable her to eat.

She felt that the Mexican must have discovered some persons approaching—her father and Roy it might be, with a rescuing party—and her heart bounded to her throat, while she strove with all her power, to throw off the oppressive weight from her brain, and to force her muscles to natural action.

The sun had set some time previous, and the bottom timber was dark, although a bright moon sailed high in the heavens, lighting up the plains on either side of the San Miguel, beyond the ribbon of timber.

Poor Rosa now saw that Le Grand had, in his excitement, forgotten the fact that he had relieved her wrists from the cords when he offered her food.

It might be that this was the only opening, the only chance she would have to escape from a horrible fate. Better be devoured by wild beasts than fall a victim to the Dastard, Louis Le Grand!

These thoughts flashed through the poor girl's mind; the possibility that her father and Roy might be on the north plain, hastening to her rescue, gave her hope and strength.

She staggered to her feet, reeled across the camp and into the undergrowth, but before she had gone ten paces from the margin of the bushes that bordered the camp, she fell to the earth. She contrived, however, to crawl upon hands and knees into the thicket, and lay panting with fright.

Soon she heard the splashing of waters, followed by crashing of bushes, and then the

camp resounded with horrible oaths from Le Grand, who yelled, as soon as he could control himself:

"Fool, that I was, to leave the camp and she untied! Antonio, hitch up the mules and put them to full speed over the plain toward the Frio. That will draw the pursuers away from the San Miguel, and I shall thus be enabled to find her.

"Hurry, I say, and put two miles between you and the timber before they cross. If they press too hard jump your horse and escape. I'll find the girl and join you at the fork on the Frio, for I can locate it by the chart you gave me. Tell your comrades to lay low until I come."

These words, spoken hurriedly, caused the Mexican to work lively, and the mules were nearly harnessed when Le Grand, secreting his horse and equipments in an adjoining thicket, tore through the bushes, with horrible oaths, directly past the covert of Rosa Ray, who was so filled with horror by this time that she fainted.

On, like a famished beast scenting his prey, rushed Louis Le Grand, tearing through the undergrowth, darting keen glances into each and every thicket, yet no trace was there of the one he sought. On he went, until at last a vine tripped him, and he fell, with a deep curse, into a gully, on the bed of which he lay, foaming at the mouth, frantic with fury.

For the last two or three days he had refrained from drink, realizing that he must keep his brain clear—that his very life depended upon how he managed his flight; but now, his captive escaped, and he forced to send his wagon and only comrade away, leaving him alone with the avengers advancing at headlong speed—all this, so totally unexpected, maddened and demoralized him. He tore his flask from his pocket, drinking as he lay, an unreasonable quantity of the fiery liquor.

All at once he thought of Antonio and the wagon, and bounding to his feet he rushed south through the belt of timber until he reached the edge of the same. He then peered out.

It was nearly as light as day on the prairie, and glancing over it, Le Grand discovered the wagon flying toward the Frio at terrific speed, the mules at full gallop, and Antonio lashing them at every bound, while the saddle-horse of the Mexican was hitched to the hind part of the wagon.

Le Grand gave a fiendish laugh and then muttered:

"The infernal idiot! I didn't think he would dare make the attempt. They will hang him like a dog, for he can't escape them.

"But had it not been for him we should have been surprised and my brilliant career at an end. It was the only *ruse*, after discovering the pursuers, that could defeat them and save my bacon; and, now I think of it, the most lucky event that could have occurred is my charming Rosa's flight—that is, providing I recover her.

"Had she been in the camp I should, under the impulse of the moment, have thrust her into the wagon, jumped my horse, and hurried toward the Frio. That would have secured my 'wiping out' at the end of a rope; and Roy Randolph would have had his revenge, and his darling as well. If I can find her now, and I know she can't have walked far in these thickets, and can reach the fork where the bandits that Antonio belongs to are encamped, I shall be all serene.

"I'll run them to the train, and make them a present of two wagons, with the mules. If I play my cards cunningly I can, I have no doubt, get the band under my control.

"By heavens, there they are! They have swallowed the bait; but they could not be expected to do otherwise. Curses on those false-hearted cowards who, a few days ago, were under my thumb! Now they are hunting me to the death; but let them beware. Louis Le Grand has a few more cards to play yet, and the spots on the pasteboards are red—red as blood! Roy Randolph, Captain Ray, and my dear old pals, here's luck!"

Lifting his flask to his lips, he drank, previously waving the same toward the plain in a graceful arch, in mock salutation.

And the sight that the miscreant saw was one that might well cause him self-gratulation and relief; for eight horsemen were speeding over the plain at a mad gallop, in pursuit of the wagon. They were led by Roy Randolph and Captain Ray, the ex-comrades of Le Grand being in the rear, with Double Dan, bound fast to his horse, in their midst.

Bent forward, plying spurs without mercy, on they went, flecks of foam flying from their horses' mouths. The faces of all were set with stern and desperate resolution, mingled with exultation; for they all believed that Rosa Ray was in the fast-flying wagon. Indeed, they had not the slightest doubt that Le Grand was also in the vehicle; this last belief, when they thought it over, causing them the utmost concern, for they feared that the miscreant might kill the maiden when he saw that capture was inevitable.

Pallid, careworn and drawn with anguish

and privation were the faces of the pursuers, and Double Dan was as ghastly as a corpse.

Thus, on went our hero, nerved to tear the fiend to pieces who had torn Rosa Ray from her home and friends; while Captain Ray was insane in his thirst for revenge, and the young planters little less so, for each hour since the start had increased their hatred for the Dastard who had so disgraced them by association, and nearly led them into outlawry themselves.

Again the demon laugh of Le Grand burst forth in exultation and taunt, as he shook his clinched fist toward the galloping men; crying out as he darted into the dark depths of the bottom timber:

"Not yet, Roy Randolph! Not yet!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BEATEN AT ANOTHER POINT.

WHEN Rosa Ray recovered from her swoon, she knew not at first where she was, nor what had occurred.

A shudder ran through her frame as she realized that she was in the dark woods, far from any human habitation, alone, and where wild beasts might at any time discover her, and tear her to pieces.

It was some consolation to her that her limbs were free, and that, from what had occurred, she well knew that friends were near who would risk their lives to save her. It was some time, however, before she felt thus comforted; and then she crawled stealthily in the direction of the camp, as she judged, fearing each instant to hear Le Grand crash through the bushes and clutch her.

Avoiding the open patches which the moon illumined, Rosa crept onward; when suddenly the thunderous tramp of animals almost paralyzed her with fright; for the poor, nervous girl, so broken by anguish, terror and privation, thought the sounds must be caused by the mules and wagon, and that they were speeding in her direction. She was unable, in her weak state, to reason that it was impossible for a wagon to pass between the trees, beneath which she was crawling, or even through the undergrowth, were there no timber.

Instinctively she hastened onward, when in a very short space of time, to her surprise, she saw the moonlit plain in front of her, and realized that the sounds of fast-tramping hoofs were now evidently upon the plain.

Parting the bushes slightly, and guided by the sounds to her left eastward, a sight burst upon her astonished vision, that so overpowered her, and filled her with thankfulness and joy, that she gasped for breath.

It was that of her father and Roy, with half a dozen other men, all galloping from the line of timber out on the plain; while afar in their front, also going at a fearful rate, was the wagon that had so long been her prison.

Rosa now recalled the words of Le Grand, as he had instructed the Mexican; and she knew that her friends supposed her to be in the wagon ahead of them, as her captor had intended—that Antonio was leading them away from the San Miguel, to enable Le Grand to recapture her, and foil her friends. She saw then that she was being left to her fate, while those who were dearest to her on earth were galloping fast from her. She strove to shriek, but not a sound could find utterance; and she was forced to clutch at the bushes to support even a crouching position.

Far more than life depended, she knew, upon her warning her father and friends, but she was unable to articulate a sound.

And before she recovered sufficiently to call out, the maiden knew that it would be useless, and even hazardous; for the galloping horsemen could not hear her, but probably Le Grand could, and would be guided by the sound to her side. Thus she sat, watching the fast-speeding forms of those who had come so far to save her from a horrible fate. Every hope seemed now to be banished, as the awfulness of her position was fully realized.

By an almost superhuman effort she drew herself to a standing position, and staggered out from the undergrowth over the plain.

There was no hope that she could overtake her father and Roy; but the timber held a horror that was too dreadful to think of—the brutal face of Le Grand being ever present with her—and the faint, weak, and hopeless maiden stumbled along over the prairie, her swollen ankles torturing her at every movement.

Not more than half a mile from the timber had she gone, when again Le Grand peeped from the undergrowth, anxious to ascertain if the wagon had been overtaken, and he gave one of his fiendish cries of triumph, when he saw his recent captive, and knew that she was again in his power.

Like a madman, he rushed to the thicket where he had secreted his horse, equipped the animal with all possible speed, sprung into the saddle, drove spurs, and dashed through the bushes, and out upon the plain at headlong speed.

Poor Rosa heard the tramp of the steed, and turning quickly, the exultant laugh of Le Grand broke on her ears. At the same moment, she recognized the fiendish face.

With a piercing shriek she sunk to the earth, where she lay, devoid of sense, and with all the outward appearance of a corpse.

This sight, which would have almost melted a heart of stone, only caused another brutal laugh to break from Le Grand's lips; and he drew rein, dismounted, lifted the limp form of Rosa Ray on his saddle, and then sprung again astride, taking his recovered prize in his arms.

Driving deep his spurs, he turned his horse in a quartering course toward the timber of the San Miguel, and then along the border of the same; no longer fearing discovery, as the avengers were too intent upon the wagon they were pursuing, to think of turning to notice anything in their rear.

Slowly, but surely, the pursuers now gained upon the wagon, within which they believed was the poor maiden, for whom they were ready to sacrifice their lives, had she been surrounded and held captive by a hundred cut-throats.

However, they were gratified to know that there could not possibly be more than two men to contend with; and these, they had registered an oath, should hang to the nearest tree.

Still on, sparing not spurs, until Antonio began to perceive that his doom was sealed, the Mexican did not abandon the wagon and mules, with which he had hoped to escape, and to run into the camp of his bandit comrades, or he would not so readily have consented to leaving the San Miguel and taken to the open plain.

Jerking the mules to a halt, Antonio sprang from his perch on the wheeler, and ran to his horse in the rear of the wagon; unloosing the animal, and bounding upon his back.

Casting a look behind him, his face became ghastly, as he saw how near were the avengers; and he drove spurs deep, guiding his horse close up to the team of mules, and lashing each and every animal unmercifully with his long "black snake."

With snorts of pain and affright, the mules sprang madly forward into a wild stampede, the wagons surging and the wheels humming; the leaders heading more to the northward than when controlled by Antonio, who was now speeding his horse straight toward the Rio Frio.

The Mexican fancied that this movement would cause the pursuers to divide, if they decided to give him chase; and that a short halt, or slackening of speed would be necessitated to consult in this respect, during which he would gain time. But he was mistaken, for Roy Randolph yelled to two of the young planters to pursue the fleeing miscreant; believing it not impossible that the lone rider might be Louis Le Grand in disguise.

Everything considered, this seemed quite probable; and two of the best mounted of the young men turned their horses in pursuit of Antonio, while the remainder spurred on after the wagon, which was now going at more terrific speed than ever, the mules being frantic with terror.

The pale and anxious faces of Captain Ray and our hero became agonized in appearance, as they gazed at the wagon which was being jerked at such speed as to cause the hinder portion at times to bound in the air, the wheels clear of the ground.

On they galloped, urging their horses to greater speed, thinking only of the dread position of the one so dear to them both. Then, as they gazed at the white tilts, longing to see beneath its arch, the mules suddenly bounded to the left, as if something in their front had frightened them.

The hearts of the observers sprang up in their throats as they saw that the wagon must be overturned, but they dreamed not of that which was to follow, for no sooner did the lead and string mules show their sides in the turn than suddenly the wagon pitched forward, the back part in the air and the wheels fast revolving. It was for an instant only; then the wagon and mules disappeared from view, as if they had been swallowed up in the earth.

A piercing yell of anguish burst from Captain Ray, and he sunk forward, his gray hair mingling with the flying mane of his horse, while he clutched the saddle-horn for support.

A groan was extorted from Roy, whose eyes seemed about to burst from their sockets; but he drove deep his spurs and dashed onward, as did the young planters who were with him.

Double Dan trembled like an aspen-leaf, for he well knew there would be no mercy shown him by those who held him captive—that all who had been connected with the abduction of Rosa Ray, now undoubtedly crushed to death, would be hanged like dogs by her avengers.

Roy Randolph reached the scene of the catastrophe and jerked his horse to a halt on the very edge of a deep barranca.

Far below him, on the bed of the barranca, lay mules and wagon, the latter shattered and broken, and the animals either dead or dying.

Like a madman Roy spurred up the bank of the barranca for a long distance before reaching a "wash-out" which led into the same. This was dangerous of descent, nevertheless down he urged his horse, and then over the barranca bed toward the crushed wagon.

Upon reaching the wreck Roy sprang to the earth as he drew his bowie, and with frantic slashes cut clear the tilt from the broken hoops and hurled right and left the debris of the freight. Captain Ray and the remainder of the party arrived as our hero raised himself up, his features radiant with relief and thankfulness as he cried out:

"Thank God! She is not here, Captain Ray. Your daughter was not in the wagon."

The next instant he yelled:

"Gentlemen, that man who drove the mules must be taken! We'll torture the truth from him! Le Grand has foiled us at every point. Spur deep, and follow!"

"I sincerely hope that our friends have captured the miscreant, whoever he is. Dan"—addressing himself to the captive—"say your prayers, for your time is short. I am desperate now, desperate as death itself! And I swear that all who have in the slightest degree been connected with this infernal deed, shall die by the rope!"

"Spur on, men! Don't despair, Captain Ray! We will yet foil the plans of the Dastard Le Grand!"

The eyes of Roy Randolph blazed with fury, as he thus spoke, and Double Dan crouched yet lower in his saddle, his eyes filled with abject terror; as all sped on their return to the upper plain, and thence on toward the fleeing Mexican, who was now far ahead, the two young planters but a quarter of a mile in his rear.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AMONG THE BANDITS.

FULL fifteen miles had been the gallop from Rio San Miguel to the barranca, and five miles south of this was the Rio Frio; the dark ribbon of timber promising protection to Antonio from his pursuers.

As time passed on, the two young planters, in hot pursuit, would gain upon the Mexican rapidly; then the latter would shoot forward at redoubled speed, and they could not help seeing that the fugitive would gain the timber before he could be captured. Yet still they kept on, at their utmost speed, feeling positive that Le Grand had hurried his captive on ahead of the wagon from the San Miguel; that the miscreant had probably discovered them, with the aid of a glass, when they were afar north on the plain toward the Rio Medina, and had hastened away with the unfortunate maiden.

Had not this been the case, they reasoned that the driver of the mules would have left the wagon and the animals secreted on the San Miguel, and would have hid himself, or else have dashed up the stream, and thus escaped.

No longer did our friends think that the man they were pursuing was Louis Le Grand; just the opposite. For they were confident that the abductor of Rosa must now be hurrying to some secure hiding-place with his captive.

At the moment they discovered that Rosa had not been in the wagon when it was thrown over into the barranca, they knew that Le Grand must have perceived their approach, and made sure, in some way, of the safety of himself and his fair captive.

They did not once think of the probability of Le Grand and Rosa's being in their rear, and so felt that their only hope of rescuing her depended upon capturing the driver of the wagon, and forcing him to reveal the whereabouts of his dastardly employer.

Double Dan had led them to the right place on the San Miguel. Had he done otherwise he would have been banged forthwith by the desperate men, who, worn by privation and fatigue, were in no mood to be trifled with.

On dashed Antonio, he being near the timber, and close behind him the two young planters; the remainder of the party being half a mile further back. Suddenly the Mexican half turned in his saddle, and fired two shots in quick succession toward his nearest pursuers, but without doing any harm. Had the young planters been accustomed to border life, they would at once have suspected danger, and decided that the two reports of the Greaser's revolver were intended as signals of warning, or for help; as the distance between the parties was much further than a revolver could send a bullet.

This, however, was unnoticed by the two young men, they evidently thinking that the fugitive was merely trying to frighten them, in order that they might jerk up, giving him advantage when it was most needed.

After the shooting, the Mexican darted ahead, his horse showing remarkable speed and endurance; and soon steed and rider shot into the dark shades of the Rio Frio. Now it was, that the pursuers were greatly alarmed, and doubtful in regard to capturing the driver; and to prevent the latter from going either up or down the stream, Roy and one of the young men spurred to the right, toward the river, in an oblique course, our hero, by a gesture, instructing the others, headed by Captain Ray, to ride obliquely to the left, the trails thus diverging from a point.

But a little time elapsed after the disappearance of the teamster, when the two foremost of the pursuers spurred their horses headlong

into the bottom timber; in fact, before the bushes had ceased to sway from the dash of the Mexican.

As has been intimated, the two revolver-shots fired by Antonio would have created suspicion in the mind of any prairie roamer, and caused caution in following close after the Mexican. And to understand more fully the position of affairs and what followed, we will dash ahead of the teamster in his mad flight, during the latter portion of which, as he realized that he was safe from pursuit, his features were lighted up with a fiendish triumph.

A pistol-shot from the edge of the timber, between the same and the river, was a natural opening, clear of trees and undergrowth, of about an acre in extent; and on that portion of it nearest to the river were lariatied fully a score and a half of mustangs, while on the borders of the "open" nearest the plain, over which the chase was in progress, were a score of blanketed forms and the smoldering embers of a couple of camp-fires.

A single, solitary sentinel sat in the middle of the encampment smoking a corn-shuck cigarette, the fragrant aroma of which floated through the air. Doubtless others were beyond the confines of the camp to guard against surprise.

The sentinel was attired in the buckskins of the Rio Grande, the breeches being slashed, fringed and buttoned, as was also his *jagüeta*, while a highly-ornamented sombrero rested carelessly on the back of his head. Each sleeping form was wrapped in a Mexican blanket brilliant in color, and the face of each was shaded from the moon's rays by a wide, stiff sombrero; this and their yellow hands proved that they were Greasers, while their number, together with the time and place, showed they were outlaws.

Thus was it in the camp in the Frio bottom. All was still but for the noise made by the mustangs, by the stamping of their hoofs and in tearing grass from the sod.

Suddenly two reports of Antonio's revolver burst with startling vividness on the plain, and echoed through the arches of the timber.

If each sleeper had received a heavy charge from a powerful electric battery, the effect would not have been greater. They sprang from the ground, seized their carbines, and stood braced for fight, the moon lighting up their faces; and a more fiendish and merciless horde its silvery rays never rested upon.

Before they could fully comprehend the nature of the sound that had broken their slumbers, there rushed into their midst, carbine in hand, one of their number, who had doubtless been stationed to overlook the plain.

"Antonio—Antonio comes back!" he shouted. "Ten *diablo* Texanos chase him into Frio timber. Two come first. Put away *escopetas*! Knife and lasso come first. *Alerta!* Antonio comes fast!"

With these words the sentinel returned into the undergrowth, the bandits quickly disposing of their carbines, some drawing knives, others coiling and adjusting lassoes with quick movements, their gaze fastened toward the plain, and their ears strained to catch the sounds, now easily distinguished as the tramping of steeds at full speed.

The sudden and simultaneous awakening of the bandits, together with their movements toward defense and capture of the enemy, all spoke of long experience and strict discipline, as well as regular organization. There was no undue excitement or crowding, the outlaws scattering along the north side of the camp.

At the very moment that these preparations were perfected, Antonio urged his panting steed through the undergrowth into the camp, jerking the animal to a halt, and yelling:

"Eight *diablo* Texanos! Plenty money at ranches on Brazos. No kill—lasso, then tie to tree!"

Half-bent, a number of the bandits gathered on each side of the point where Antonio had crashed through the bushes.

"Two come first," he explained. "Throw rope quick, pull out of way. Plenty fun soon."

With these words, Antonio sprang from his horse, allowing the fagged animal to go free, among the lariatied mustangs that were now prancing about in affright at the night alarm. Then he ran back toward the plain on a course parallel to that by which he had entered the camp.

On came the two young planters, quite unsuspecting of danger, except from the fugitive; who, they reasoned, might have dismounted and crouched in the thickets to fire upon them. This probability caused them to draw their revolvers and glance searchingly on all sides. On they came, through the undergrowth, which reached above the heads of the riders, the branches flying in their faces, and before they fully realized that an "open" was in front of them their animals bounded free from the bushes into the bandit camp.

The gaze of the amazed young men took in everything, the horses, camp-equipments, and the score of crouching, murderous-looking Mexicans—all with their brutal faces gleaming with

hate and exultation, their white teeth showing beast-like between their lips and their lassoes in hand.

But this was only for an instant. Then the hiss of cowhide ropes through the air filled their ears, their horses bounding on in affright to join their kind near the river, and rendered more frantic as the riders instinctively threw up their revolvers at the very moment that the snake-like, deadly coils settled over their shoulders.

The next moment both the planters were jerked to the earth, over the hams of their plunging horses, and falling with a terrible force that bereft them of sense, while two of the yellow-skinned outlaws dropped their lassocoils, threw up their arms and with gurgling yells that forced their life-blood from mouth and nostrils, fell upon the sward. The aim of the young men had been true. The faces of the bandits contorted as their comrades fell with redoubled hatred and fury.

The reports of the revolvers were heard by both Roy's party and the captain's, one being up the stream and the other down, from the bandit camp. They were each and all actuated by the same feeling, indignation at the supposed shooting of the teamster, thus cutting off all chance of forcing him to disclose the whereabouts of Rosa Ray. Then madly they spurred toward the point whence the revolver reports had sounded, echoing so startlingly through the silent natural arches of the bottom timber.

It was at this time that Antonio darted into the camp from the undergrowth just in time, for he had detected from the outer edge of the bushes, the separation of the Texans, and understood that their object was to prevent his escape either up or down-stream. He was also in time to save the lives of the young planters; for, infuriated to madness at the slaying of two of their number, the furious cut-throats had hurled themselves, their long *cuchillas* glittering in the moonlight, upon the senseless Texans. A dozen knives were elevated to cut them in pieces when Antonio, with an oath of fury, rushed forward, crying out:

"Fools! Each man is worth five thousand pesos alive and not a *maraveda* dead. There is plenty of game in the woods, but we must take them alive. This is the luckiest bonanza we have ever struck.

"*Caramba!* Look to your lassoes! To your posts, and keep your eyes open! Hark, the *Texanos* come, and like a norther, for they are mad!"

The scene that followed is beyond our power to describe.

Captain Ray and his party, with Double Dan in their midst, plunged from the undergrowth, at the same moment that Roy, followed by his planter pard, broke bush opposite them; all filled with apprehension, for they now believed it quite possible that the teamster had lain in wait and shot the two Texans.

The sight that met their gaze dumfounded them for the moment, thus favoring the bandits.

Lassoes hissed through the air from every side, horses snorted, plunged and reared, while yells of fury drowned the rallying outcries of Roy Randolph; whose revolver sent a bandit to his long home, on the instant that his arms were pinioned to his side by two lariats.

Revolver shots, deep curses, dying yells, outcries of pain—a perfect vocal and optical pandemonium—lasted for a full minute; then the Texans lay helpless on the ground, within the torturing folds of tightly drawn rawhide ropes. Double Dan was saved from like treatment by Antonio, whose rage was unbounded, when he recognized in him the teamster whom he supposed to be now advancing from the Medina, with the wagon-train, which he had intended to put to the use of the band.

Bound though they were, bruised and terribly shaken up by being jerked from their horses, both Captain Ray and Roy Randolph gazed about the camp in search of Rosa; heaving sighs of relief when they perceived that she was not, as they were, in the power of the yellow-skinned bandits of the Rio Bravo.

CHAPTER XXIV.

COMING TO TERMS.

ROY and Captain Ray had entertained no doubts that they would be able to rescue Rosa at San Antonio; believing they should overtake the wagon-train in the Alamo City. Their disappointment was most intense, therefore, when they ascertained that the wagons had gone toward the Medina; although they were positive that they could trail them.

When, therefore, they entered the camp and found that they had been duped—that Le Grand had, with his captive and one wagon, left the train before reaching San Antonio, as they learned from Double Dan—they grew more apprehensive than ever.

Then, when they discovered the lone wagon flying over the prairie toward the Rio Frio, after the driver had undoubtedly perceived their approach; then they were positive that their journey was nearly at an end—that Rosa would be recovered within the hour. But,

when, after their excruciating anguish at observing the wagon disappear, and to see it crushed in the barranca, their relief at finding that Rosa was not in it, was equaled by the disheartening consciousness that they seemed no nearer the accomplishment of their purpose than when in San Antonio.

However, as they dashed in pursuit of the teamster, their hopes revived; for they believed that they could force the man to reveal the whereabouts of Le Grand and his fair captive. But when the fugitive gained the timber and disappeared, they feared that he would escape, until the revolver-shots proved that either he was shot or their friends.

Then, when they found themselves surrounded by Mexican bandits, encircled with torturing lassoes, and afterward bound to trees; and saw their apparently dead comrades stretched on the sward, and no trace of Rosa or of Le Grand within view—when their terrible position was realized in all its details, it was not strange that they were oppressed by despair.

They had, indeed, been foiled at every point. And deeper oppressed, and more hopeless were they, when they saw Double Dan released, and conversing with the bandits. Antonio, the teamster, who appeared to be a leader of the ruffian horde, was at first furiously incensed against Dan; but, at length, he ordered a dozen bandits to equip horses, and hasten to the Medina, capture the train and slaves, and return at all possible speed to their present encampment. Double Dan was forced to act as guide to the party, Antonio explaining to him that all would be well, should the train be delivered over to his followers.

When Double Dan and this party left the camp, our friends fully believed that the lawless horde were going, not only to regain the wagons, but to conduct Le Grand and Rosa to the bandits' encampment.

Antonio evidently did not think it advisable for him to accompany the detachment, as he feared that his followers would murder all the Texans, in revenge for their having killed five of their number, before the lassoes had prevented further use of arms. His proceedings and words proved that he intended to profit by the information he had gained from Le Grand, while at the same time favoring the latter in every way possible; as he felt that the now outlawed planter would be of great service to the band.

That the doubts of Antonio, in regard to his followers not obeying his orders against killing the Texans if he left them, were not groundless, was plainly evident from the murderous glances cast at the bound captives, as the outlaws removed the dead from the camp.

At once he gave directions that the two senseless planters should be bound, and he himself dashed gourds of water over their heads; as they, with groans of agony, recovered consciousness, much to the relief and joy of their comrades, as well as of Captain Ray and Roy Randolph. The two latter had been much depressed, when they reflected that these young men had been, as they thought, slain, while nobly acting as volunteers in the attempted rescue of poor Rosa.

These two were now also bound, the captives forming a crescent; all being able to look in each other's eyes, their heads being free, but their wrists secured behind them, and to the trees.

After the departure of Double Dan and the twelve bandits, there were but eight, including Antonio remaining, and these held seven Texans captive; the latter, not only bound and helpless, but broken by privation, fatigue, and utter despair.

All, except Roy and the captain, seemed to have relinquished all hope, expecting nothing but death; the rescue of Rosa they had abandoned as an impossibility, their thoughts being now bent entirely on their own terrible position, and the probable near approach of death from the knives of the swarthy assassins in whose power they were.

Captain Ray and Roy Randolph were in a state of desperation. All their senses were strained, watching each movement and change of features in their brutal captors, to detect aught in their favor, or some knowledge in regard to Le Grand and Rosa. When they reflected on the sufferings, mental and physical, that the poor maiden must be enduring, it caused them to banish all thoughts of self, except to plot and plan toward escape, which appeared now to be impossible. In fact, the more they reviewed their surroundings, the less grounds of hope they felt toward accomplishing an escape.

They knew that they were not near the traveled trail, or wagon-road, from Rio Medina to Pleasanton, and that there was no possibility of rangers, scouts, or ranchmen, coming in the vicinity; if there was, the Mexican bandits would not have encamped there.

While our friends were thus meditating, the camp had been restored to order, the dead buried, and sentinels posted; and then Antonio, with a most fiendish expression of countenance, stepped within the crescent of captives, saying:

"Now, seniors, I talk with you. My men want your blood for killing five good fighters, and I will give you over to them if you do not

agree to do as I shall say. We want five thousand pesos (dollars) for each of your lives.

"Two shall go and get the money, and then come back here quick. They shall not speak of where their friends are, and shall not have a chance to betray us. I shall have spies on Medina, on San Miguel, to watch for them, and I shall move my camp, leaving a spy in a high tree here. Then, if your two men who bring the money are alone, my spy will guide them to my camp. If they bring help to fight for you, I shall be told by my spy; then you must all die.

"You hear me what I say? I shall not talk twice. If you agree to this, speak! If not, my men shall kill you where you stand like dogs."

The young planters raised their heads, with something like hope in their eyes, but they gazed at Roy as if that hope depended entirely upon him. Our hero at once detected the glance, and understood it.

"I will give you ten thousand dollars to restore my daughter to me!" exclaimed Captain Ray, repudiating his own fearful situation.

"What do I know of your daughter? I have no women captives!" retorted Antonio, savagely.

"You drove the wagon for that devil, Louis Le Grand, who stole her; and you know, or ought to know, her whereabouts. As you hope for mercy, tell me where my child has been taken!"

Roy prudently said not a word. He realized that the situation was most desperate, and that the Mexican would not brook many words.

"If the senorita in the wagon was your daughter," said Antonio, impatiently, "I will say that she escaped, and that Senor Le Grand is searching for her on the San Miguel. But I care not for him, or for her. I want my answer. Agree to pay the money and you live; refuse, and you all die to-night."

The thoughts of Roy had been busy since Antonio first spoke; and as he asserted that Rosa had escaped, he knew, or believed that the Mexican spoke the truth. When the bandits left, under the guidance of Double Dan, our hero knew that they meant to relieve Le Grand and his tool of their train, and that there was no tie between the miscreant and the bandit chief, except that the latter intended to bleed Le Grand of everything.

The assertion in regard to Rosa lifted a heavy load off the mind of Roy and the young planters, while Captain Ray called out in heartfelt tones:

"Thank Heaven, my darling has escaped from that human hyena!"

The matter in hand, as far as Roy could decide, admitted of no delay, and required no deliberation. The money must be procured, and delivered without the bearers bringing any help to rescue them, or against the bandits.

All this was plain, and the cunning outlaw had laid his plans well. There only remained the manner of procuring the ransom, and a guarantee of their being set free upon its reception.

"Which two of us do you propose sending for the money?" asked Roy.

Antonio pointed out the two young men who had first entered the camp.

"Why do you not send myself and this gentleman?" he next inquired, designating Captain Ray.

The bandit chief cast a look of mingled hate and fury at the speaker, as he replied:

"I am not a fool, and I shall not wait for an answer to my question much longer."

"If this money is forthcoming," continued Roy, "how do we know that you will release us upon its payment? This I consider somewhat important."

"My spy shall lead the two seniors, who bring it, out on the plain and there leave them. I will go alone and see if the money is all right. If so, I will give the signal for you to be released. You will take your arms and horses and ride down the river; then the two men will leave the money, step back to their horses, and ride to you."

"That is fair," said Roy; "we agree to your terms as there is no alternative."

"Mr. Drew and Mr. Gould, you each raise your share, and it shall be returned to you, for you are in the service of Miss Rosa Ray. I will give you an order upon my overseer for fifteen thousand dollars, and Captain Ray will draw upon his man Williams for ten thousand."

"That fills the bill. Are you agreed, captain?"

"Most certainly. But my poor child—what is to become of her?"

As he spoke, the old man's voice trembled.

"Cheer up, Captain Ray!" said our hero; "it is some consolation to know that she is not in the power of that wretch. He shall yet die, as I have sworn!"

"Capitan Antonio, produce your paper and untie our hands! You have made a good haul, but the career you have chosen will have a terrible ending. I warn you now, that after our release, I shall do my utmost to regain my gold and avenge myself for the treatment we have received. As we are to pay heavy for being entertained by you, I demand food and drink!"

A sneering smile greeted the threat of Roy, but it was evident to all that the Mexican was much pleased at his success—that he preferred their gold to their blood—for, not only did he show this in his face, but by the alacrity of his movements and his quick-given orders in Spanish, to his followers.

The Texans were surprised at the rapidity with which matters were arranged, for in a very short space of time, two fresh horses were quipped and held ready for the start—the young men, Drew and Gould, being cut free—while the bandit chief stood before Roy with writing materials.

The right hand of our hero was released, Captain Ray being served in the same manner, a bandit presenting a revolver at the breast of each, while Antonio bade them draw up the orders for the money at once; the moon giving sufficient light for the purpose.

Drew and Gould had their bruises attended to and were also provided with provisions, and had their canteens filled with water. Then, as the papers were ready, they bade farewell to their friends, promising to ride at full speed to the Rio Brazos, changing horses as was needed, and to bring the money or die in the attempt.

Although closely watched the meaning glance of the captain was understood by the two young men, who gave him an assuring look in return as they drove spurs and vanished from sight in the undergrowth, after Antonio had repeated his directions concerning their return, and explained the consequences should they bring a force to relieve the captives and destroy his band.

After the departure of Drew and Gould the bandits, with the exception of the necessary sentinels, rolled themselves in their serapes and were soon asleep; all the captives, except Roy and Captain Ray, falling forward in spite of their painful position, and sinking into slumber.

Roy soon found himself the only man awake, except the bandit guard. Fatigue and privation drew a veil over their eyes, banishing all consciousness of worldly affairs—of agony, anguish and grief.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SPY IN THE CAMP.

ABOUT the same time that the two young planters were pressing hard to overtake Antonio, just previous to the time when the latter fired his revolver to alarm his followers, a horseman was urging his fagged animal down the border of the timber line of the Rio Frio, on the north side of the same, and about one mile west of the bandit camp.

This man was of powerful build, huge in stature, with broad shoulders, and apparently of great muscular strength, combined with suppleness and quickness of motion.

He was clad in buckskin breeches, fringed deeply on the outer seams, and thrust into the legs of cowhide boots. A blue woolen shirt, open at the neck and with a flowing collar, around which was knotted loosely a large cotton kerchief; this, with a wide-brimmed black sombrero, made up his outfit, in the way of clothing.

A wide and stout belt about his waist supported a brace of old style Colt's army six-shooters and a bowie-knife, while a short muzzle-loading rifle, of heavy caliber, hung at the horn of his saddle.

The features of this burly borderer, for such his arms, garb, and general appearance proclaimed him, were those of an honest, brave and fearless man, his mild blue eyes lending a winning look to his face that would at once assure trustworthiness.

His hair was long, dark-brown and wavy, and his beard of the same color, but short.

Darting keen glances ahead, his right hand clutching the breech of his rifle, the reins in his left, thus ready for instant defense, down the margin of the Frio timber he proceeded, speaking low and cheering words to his horse.

This man was none other than Big Foot Wallace, the most noted scout and ranger, Indian and Mexican fighter on the great South and Southwest borders, and it was most providential to our friends that he happened to be in the locality. And being there, it was most providential that, as he approached, not aware of any "humans" being in that section, our friends were the means of drawing his attention to them, thus revealing the presence of bandits in the timber. For the revolver-shots would not have been fired by Antonio, neither would the latter have been on the Frio, had it not been for those whose trail we have for a time followed.

And had not Big Foot Wallace been thus warned, he would, without doubt, have been shot dead by the sentinels near the camp, as his horse was fagged and he intended camping when he reached that point.

The giant scout, although ever on the alert, could not have detected the presence of any living thing in the "open" chosen by the bandits as a camping-place, for they were too far from the edge of the timber for the slight sounds caused by the animals to be heard, especially by one riding his own horse. The Mexicans on guard would, besides, have discovered him, their most dreaded enemy, and his

useful life would have ended in a sudden and tragic manner.

But it was ordained to be otherwise, for the two revolver reports, although nearly a mile away, reached his keen ears, notwithstanding the breeze was westerly, blowing the sounds eastward.

Big Foot quickly brought his horse to a halt, exclaiming to the animal, as much as to himself:

"Hol' up, ole boss! Jehossifat, ef thar ain't some fun goin' on, I'm a roarin', ragin' afferdavy bu'ster! Glide 'long easy-like, under ther shadders, until I kin git a squar' peepet things."

As he said this he started the horse more under the branches and along beneath the same.

"Dang, an' double-dang me, ef I doesn't b'lieve thar's somethin' inter that timber that would ha' bin sorter dangerous ter we-'uns ef we'd sloshed 'long without gittin' kinder worked up by thet shooter! For thet warn't shot ter kill, but es a signal, I'm dead sure an' sartain."

"Ef that ain't a Greaser a-gittin' ter save his carkiss, I never see'd one; an' thar's two white men a-lungin' arter him. Whoop! what's a-comin' nex'? Thar's 'nother batch on abindt. Six more white men, an' one on 'em ridin' es though he war tied ter his critter an' didn't like ter go. What in thunderation does this hyar all mean?"

"Thar scoots ther Greaser inter ther bush an' ther two white pilgrims hot arter him. Cuss my cats! es Ole Rock says, ef hit ain't gittin' interestin', ef I hes gut a back seat. Reckon I'll hev ter take a hand in this game sooner er later."

At this moment the young planters disappeared in the timber, and Big Foot again drew rein to listen. The two shots fired by them, as the lassoes caught the baffled pursuers of Antonio, sounded loud through the timber.

"Thar's more'n one Greaser in kiver yunder," soliloquized the scout. "Ther cuss what war chased would ha' jumped his critter an' tuck 'crost ther drink ef he hedn't pards layin' low, fer he know'd he war boun' ter be kerral'd ef he lingered."

"I swan, ther t'others air jist a-humpin' thar-selves; an' ole boss, I'll slip yer bridle, lariat yer ter some saplin' inside o' kiver, whar thar's feed, an' skute on ther sly down-crick. I must know what's goin' on er I'll bu'st my thinkin'-box."

Quickly the scout guided his horse into the timber, selecting a small "open" secure from observation where he tied his animal, and then stole stealthily, but rapidly, down-stream, keeping himself well in the thickets.

Big Foot, with the cunning and silent movements of a red-man, approached the bandit camp until near enough to determine by the sounds produced by the many horses of the outlaws, the exact position of the encampment. He then climbed up into a huge tree, the thick foliage and drooping Spanish moss effectually concealing him after he had reached a distance half the height of the tree. Thence he proceeded with great care from tree to tree on the interlocked limbs until directly at the margin of the "open" in which was the bandit camp.

Although prepared for a surprise of some nature, the giant scout was filled with amazement when he discovered a large force of Mexican bandits at such a distance from the Rio Grande, and he saw that, had he not been warned by the sight of the two men chasing the lone Greaser, he would in all probability have been riddled with bullets.

As a matter of course, Big Foot stood ready at all times to lend his aid to all whites against reds or yellows; but now he felt a much deeper interest in this party of white men, from knowing that his own life had probably been saved by their appearing upon the Rio Frio in the nick of time. Consequently, he was filled with vengeful fury when he saw the two young planters lying apparently dead, the lassoes still encircling them and binding their arms tight to their sides.

And much more furious was he when he saw the disposition of the bandits, lassoes in hand, along each side of the camp, the sound of approaching from east and west proving that the remainder of the party of whites had divided and were dashing into the bandit camp from both up and down the river.

Big Foot hoped that the whites, although a few in numbers, would "break brush" with fingers on triggers, and pour a hurtling hail of lead into the Greasers; but he well knew that the former were on strange ground, and could not be aware of the presence of the Mexicans, or of the fate that had befallen their friends.

Had he known before, how matters stood, as he saw the same now, he would have kept his saddle, joined the Texans, and charged the camp with them; but there was no time now for regrets and explanations. He could not even warn them of their danger, or assist them in the least, without betraying his presence, and being shot from the tree like a 'coon.

Never, in all his varied experience, had the scout been in such a strange and perplexing position; thus to crouch silently among the branches, and witness, it was probable, the

butchery of the whites by the Mexican horde below. Such was his excitement as the Texans crushed through the undergrowth nearer and nearer, that he could not contain himself. He drew his revolvers, resolved that many a Greaser's life should pay the forfeit, for this cowardly ambuscading of half a dozen white men.

But the sight that met his eyes so dazed Big Foot, and the Texans and Mexicans were so mingled together, as the former spurred into the camp, and the latter shot lassoes from all sides, that he held fire; and fortunate it was that he did.

His eyes glared with admiration, as Roy laid two Greasers dead before being dragged from his horse; the keen eyes of the scout, and his knowledge of Mexican character preventing him from firing, as he became calmer, for he saw at once that it was the intention of the bandits to take the Texans alive, and that, for the present, they were safe.

The actions and commands of Antonio, who was well known to Big Foot, in preventing his enraged followers from killing the whites, caused the watching scout to decide that there was something behind the scenes, which time would soon make plain to him.

Thus he kept his position, and heard every word that passed; becoming in a little time, well informed as to the condition of affairs. Much relieved was he, when the two young planters arrived, and were sent for the ransom money; for Big Foot had believed them to be dead.

The fearlessness and noble bearing of Roy Randolph impressed the scout greatly, and he was filled with sympathy for Captain Ray; vowing that he would dedicate his service to the rescue of these Texans, who seemed to be strangers, and unaccustomed to the frontiers.

These men had lost their liberty, and perhaps their lives, in their endeavors to rescue a maiden from a villain who had stolen her. This much was plain, and also that the young girl had escaped from her abductor, when on the San Miguel; and he, the man Le Grand, was then searching for her.

If this maiden, Rosa Ray, was recaptured, her fate would be worse than death, for the miscreant who had stolen her, and was now in search of her, had, it seemed, entered into a compact of some kind with the bandit chief, and was under his protection.

This settled it as to his degraded character, and Big Foot vowed that, not only should Rosa Ray be saved, and the dastard, who sought her ruin, hanged; but also that the Texans, now captive beneath his perch, should be freed, and the bandits made to curse the day that they encamped on the Rio Frio, or set eyes on the coward Le Grand.

Having made a mental "afferdavy" to this effect, Big Foot Wallace began to plan how he might most effectually carry out his sworn intentions, just as the sentinels were posted for the night, and the few remaining bandits lay down to their rest.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE COILS OF THE SERPENT.

LIKE a fiend of the night, sent forth to pounce upon innocence and virtue, and blast the fair and good with his poisonous breath, on up the San Miguel galloped Louis Le Grand; spurring his steed without mercy, and claspings to his vile breast the form of the now unconscious Rosa Ray.

The face of the poor girl was plainly marked by the soul-drawn anguish, despair, and terror that had convulsed her when, staggering over the plain toward the fast flying forms of those who were seeking her—those who were dearer to her than life itself—she had been stricken to insensibility by the exultant demon laugh of Le Grand, and her eyes again, though for an instant only, caught sight of his brutal and repulsive face.

There was then, no hope; and, with a prayer for death to release her, she sunk into the arms of death's twin sister, insensibility.

At times Le Grand glanced over the plain, toward the fast flying wagon, and the pursuing men of the Brazos; and he cursed and raved, because Antonio did not leave the wagon, take to his horse, and escape. For the miscreant well knew that his own future, the success of his plans, depended upon this Mexican, whom he had bribed to serve him. Should he now be taken, and tortured into a confession, Le Grand felt that there would be little hope of his escape with Rosa; for he dared not return toward civilization, his only safety henceforth being with the bandits of whom Antonio had asserted himself to be the leader.

Thus reasoning, Le Grand, still at full speed, reached a point where he thought he could, with safety, dash away from the timber, and out upon the plain toward the Rio Frio; on a parallel course to that of the wagon.

Not a great length of time, after leaving the river, did Le Grand gallop, when, to his great relief and pleasure, he saw the wagon come to a halt, and Antonio mount his horse; afterward lashing the mules onward. Then, as the bandit

chief darted at terrific speed toward the Frio, and the mules stampeded with the wagon, Le Grand almost shrieked with joy; becoming insanely exultant as the team dashed into the barranca, he believing that the delay caused by an inspection of the wreck, would insure Antonio's escape. The young planters, he felt sure, were not able to cope with the bandit, in either speed or the use of arms.

However, as Roy was forced to ride up along the bank of the barranca, in order that he might find a passage down to the bed of the same, Le Grand, at the sight, turned ghastly, and trembled with apprehension; for he feared that he would now be discovered and recognized.

But, the attention of Roy and those with him was upon the crushed wagon; their brains being tortured beyond endurance, for they looked only to behold the crushed remains of poor Rosa Ray, amid the wagon wreck. In this, as we know, they were happily disappointed.

When all, soon after, regained the plain, Le Grand was once more beside himself with relief and exultation; for he now realized that Captain Ray, Roy, and the young planters—especially the two former—had suffered the tortures of the lost since the stampede of the mules, and that they must have been horror-stricken when the wagon disappeared into the barranca, believing Rosa to be in it.

Not only did the consciousness of the terrible agonies the pursuers had endured, correspondingly rejoice Le Grand, but he now fully believed the Fates were most kindly favoring him; for, all his most hated and dreaded enemies were, he knew from the disclosures and directions of Antonio, galloping directly toward the camp of the bandits.

If the young planters overtook the Mexican, the latter would shoot them; at all events there would be revolvers fired by one or the other, and should the bandit chief be slain, the report of fire-arms would alarm his followers, who would ride *en masse* from the timber, now in plain view, and avenge their leader.

But, in that case, he himself would be badly off; for he had no proofs of the friendship of the former, and would, without doubt, be slain or captured by the infuriated Mexicans. Therefore Le Grand was extremely anxious, as the pursuers closed in nearer and nearer to Antonio; but he was soon filled with delight once more, as the Greaser fired his revolver, and soon after disappeared into the dark shades.

Most eagerly now did Le Grand watch the Texans, and he was much puzzled when he heard more pistol-shots, and saw all of his enemies disappear in the timber of the Rio Frio.

Could Antonio have been mistaken as to the location of his camp, and had he now been slain?

Most certainly the few reports of arms, the disappearance of all the Texans into the timber, indicated this; especially as no Mexicans were to be seen.

As Le Grand proceeded on, aiming to enter the timber some two-thirds of a mile west of the point where Antonio and his pursuers had disappeared, he was amply repaid for having indulged in bellish glee at the agony and anguish he well knew his enemies to have suffered when the wagon toppled over into the barranca; for he trembled in abject terror, expecting each moment that the avengers would dart from the timber—perhaps at a point directly ahead of him, and have him at their mercy.

And he well knew that no mercy would be extended.

Having so far outwitted his pursuers at every point, having had an extraordinary run of luck, it was not strange, to a gambling man like Le Grand, to judge that Dame Fortune had deserted him, and that his doom was sealed, his cowardly crimes at an end, and retribution staring him in the face.

Consequently, there was not, at that time, on earth a more terrified wretch than Le Grand, as he spurred headlong over the soft sward toward the dark timber, that seemed to him ominous of death—that seemed filled with hideous fiends, who beckoned him onward, stretching out their repulsive arms to clutch him.

He feared to turn back over the moonlit plain; for, well he knew that, did his pursuers dart out from the timber, their attention being now no longer directed to the wagon or Antonio, they would sweep the plain with keen gaze, discover him and his burden, and give chase—a chase which would end with his capture.

His one chance, therefore, was to gain the timber as quickly as possible, regardless of the dangers which he had, with reason, imagined ahead of him—running the risk of meeting those who sought his life—and secrete himself in the shades. Jerking his horse to a halt on the margin of the timber, he gazed, with revolver cocked and presented, into the gloomy wood. But no sound met his ears, and he instinctively glanced east, down the river, toward the point at which the avengers had disappeared.

At that very moment, Drew and Gould, the two young planters, permitted by Antonio to go to the Brazos for the ransom money, galloped out from the bottom timber, and over the moonlit plain, causing Le Grand to shake in his boots, as if stricken with an ague-fit; a most fearful

dread coming over him, that chilled the blood in his veins.

Well he knew, even at that distance, those well-known forms; the poise of the heads, the movements of arms and bodies, as they sped on, were too familiar to be mistaken. And that both might be the more fully identified, they turned their faces up the river, and the moon shone full upon them.

And the guilty, terrified miscreant, although he imagined they were looking directly at him, and could recognize him at that distance, could not move a muscle to urge his horse into the undergrowth. There he sat, his eyes frozen upon the two horsemen, as if he had been turned into stone.

There was not the slightest doubt now, in the mind of Le Grand, in regard to the state of affairs down the river.

He fully believed that Antonio had been mistaken when he reported his followers as encamped at that point. He was positive that the Mexican had been shot, perhaps badly wounded, and that Roy and Captain Ray were forcing him into a confession of the whereabouts of Rosa and himself.

Gould and Drew, he argued, had been sent out on the plain to keep watch for any persons who might approach from the San Miguel.

Had not Double Dan, and the bandits who accompanied him, kept on the margin of the timber in the dense shade, and proceeded down the river for a long distance, in order that they might take a shorter course to the San Miguel, and thus avoid exposing themselves for a great length of time on the moonlit plain—had not this been the case, Le Grand would have known that all was well; that those on his track for revenge and to recover Rosa Ray were either all dead or else captives.

But it was to be as it was, and the miscreant, quaking with terror, clutched his whisky-flask and lowered the contents considerably. He then urged his reluctant horse into the dark shades, the animal seeming to share the fright of its master.

Fearful of making the slightest noise that might betray his presence, Le Grand proceeded but a short distance. He then lowered the limp form of Rosa Ray to the earth, in a small clear space amid the undergrowth, the poor maiden being still in a comatose state.

Quickly sliding to the ground, Le Grand placed Rosa in a natural position upon a blanket, wrapping the same about her form, and then led his horse to the river, allowing the animal to drink.

After this he removed the equipments, lariat-ed the horse in an "open," some distance from the one first selected, and then, securing another blanket from the cantle of his saddle, he stole cautiously back, taking also a canteen of water.

Upon reaching the place where Rosa lay still unconscious, Le Grand bathed her head with water; and then diluting some whisky in a tin cup, he raised her head and poured a quantity of the liquid into her mouth. She swallowed it spasmodically, and soon after opened her eyes, but only to close them again with a shudder; for an arrow of moonlight, falling upon them, had revealed to her the hideous face of the fiend who had torn her from home and friends.

Le Grand was not in a mood to talk. He could not express the exultation that he did not feel; in fact, he was now feeling more of despair and dread than ever he had known throughout his life.

As upon previous occasions, he now had recourse to his whisky-flask as he sat upon his blanket, now and then drinking, and at all times casting suspicious glances around, and starting in terror at the hoot of an owl or even at the slightest sound.

CHAPTER XXVII.

REDEEMED WITHOUT MONEY.

BIG FOOT WALLACE, from his perch in the tree was greatly mystified at the discovery of a white man among the Texans, who was fast bound to a horse, as the latter dashed into the bandit camp; and this feeling was not lessened when he noticed that Captain Antonio protected the captive of the Texans from harm and released him.

However, from the words which he had heard, and the orders of the bandit chief, as Double Dan and a dozen of the outlaws prepared for a night ride, afterward spurring out of the camp, Big Foot decided that not only was this white man in league with the abductor of the maiden, but that they had entered into a compact with Antonio, and had a wagon-train with slave teamsters encamped on the Medina.

The scout reasoned that the Texan pursuers of this Le Grand mentioned by the bandit chief, had followed the train and captured the wagon-master, but had failed to recover the lost maiden, she having been taken on in advance of the train to the San Miguel.

Big Foot was in a quandary and greatly perplexed.

His services were needed in three different localities which were wide apart.

He wished to gallop to the Medina, raise a

party of rancheros, and "clean out" the bandits, who had just set out to take the wagon-train.

He could, he believed, save the wagons, mules and slaves and capture the renegade white, who could then be forced to disclose the whole matter of the abduction and reveal the intentions of his employer.

He also was in great sympathy with Rosa Ray, whom he pictured wandering the dark bottom timber, of the San Miguel, in a helpless, half-crazed state, hunted by her would-be destroyer and liable to be torn to pieces by wild beasts.

These thoughts and imaginings tortured the scout, and he felt that he ought to go to the assistance of the maiden, but at the same time five brave Texans were bound and lying below him, liable to be butchered in his absence; for he well knew the treacherous Mexicans did not intend to set their captives free upon receiving the ransom money. He felt sure that they would be butchered in cold blood before the messengers reached the Medina on their way for the money, and that the latter would be waylaid, robbed and murdered upon their return.

Big Foot knew the character of the bandits too well to suppose that they would free a Texan after once getting him into their power.

Thus it was that the giant scout was in a most anxious and perplexing position; but when the Greasers rolled themselves in their blankets to sleep, after having posted three sentinels, Big Foot not only knew that the lives of the Texans were safe for the night, but that there was a chance for him to rescue them, although the attempt must be made in the most secret manner possible, as the least disturbance or alarm would be the death-signal to those bound fast to the trees.

A sentinel was, he noticed, posted on the verge of the timber overlooking the plain. Another was at some distance in the rear of the bound Texans, guarding against the approach of foes down the river; and the other was immediately within the crescent of captives in front of them, and watching their every movement—a seeming unnecessary precaution, as all except the leading spirit of the five, Roy Randolph, had allowed their heads to drop forward on their breasts, and were now sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

In a very few moments, spent in deliberation, Big Foot had decided as to his proceedings; he being positive that a search on the San Miguel after Rosa Ray would be a wild-goose chase, as he had not the slightest knowledge in regard to what point on that stream, she had succeeded in making her escape.

Should he be successful in releasing the Texans, then there would not only be a good prospect of his finding the young girl, but also of recapturing the wagon-train from the bandits.

If the plan he had arranged in his mind, could be carried out; the career of Captain Antonio, the notorious bandit and stock-thief, would be at an end.

Thus decided, Big Foot Wallace proceeded to return by the way in which he came; but he was obliged to use more caution than previously, as the attention of the outlaws, when he approached their camp, had been centered upon the capture of the Texans, but now all was still, and the sentinels on the alert.

The scout well knew that the least miscalculation, the slightest sound or disturbance made by him, unusual to the night, might lead to his discovery, and the immediate murder of the Texans; as the bandits would suppose him to be the advance scout of a party of whites, bent upon their capture. He also knew that the sentinel in the rear of the captives, as well as the one near the plain, must be disposed of, before he made any movements toward stealing upon the Greaser who sat immediately opposite the Texans.

This last would be a feat difficult to accomplish, as he would be forced to crawl across the moonlit camp in the rear of the guard, pounce upon, and kill the Mexican, without awakening the other bandits.

Proceeding as stealthily as a panther, Big Foot crawled from branch to branch, and from tree to tree, until he believed himself near the rest of the sentry. Then, with care, he lowered himself from limb to limb until at the lowermost branches, when he peered through the foliage downward; confident of his being directly over the Greaser, as the unmistakable smoke of a shuck cigarette floated upward to his nostrils.

To the scout's great relief, he saw that he had happened upon the most favorable point for the accomplishment of his purpose; for the Mexican was seated directly below him, on a log of deadwood, placidly forcing the smoke through his nostrils. Knowing that delay was most dangerous; that many valuable lives, and the riding the country of a number of murderous outlaws depended upon his every move, the scout slipped gradually over the limb which had supported him, without making the slightest noise.

The head of the Mexican was about six feet

below the heavy boot heels of the suspended giant; and, awaiting a favorable opportunity, Big Foot launched himself downward, pointing his heels directly at the "cabasa" of the Greaser, who had removed his sombrero, thus insuring his own speedy death.

The gigantic form of the scout shot downward, his heels crashing in the skull of the bandit, with a sickening sound. The form of the bandit quivered spasmodically for a moment, and then lay silent and still forever; while the scout, paying no further attention to him, peered toward the camp.

All was still, and with relief and satisfaction upon his face, Big Foot rolled the corpse under some bushes near at hand, removed pistol and knife from the body, and, thrusting them into his own belt, crawled, panther-like, beneath the undergrowth, toward the sentinel who overlooked the plain.

Upon reaching a point near the tree in which this Greaser was posted, which, being at some distance from the river, was freer from moss, and less luxuriant in foliage, the scout soon had the satisfaction of locating the exact position of his next intended victim.

To slay this bandit, without causing any alarm, was a much more difficult task than the first. However, Big Foot did not hesitate a moment, but stole up to the tree next to that occupied by the sentinel. Drawing his bowie-knife, and clutching the blade between his teeth, Big Foot, after reaching a point on a level with his intended victim, crawled slowly and silently along the branches into the tree that was destined to be the scene of the tragedy.

Although of gigantic build, the scout made no noise, his movements being cat-like; and an arrow of moonlight here and there, being sufficient to guide him to the perch of the bandit. He well knew that, even should the Greaser be attracted by his movements, it would be impossible, after bending his eyes over the bright moonlit plain for such a length of time, to distinguish anything clearly in the dark shades. He felt sure, therefore, of success.

Gaining a position where, if the sentinel should be alarmed, he could spring upon him before he comprehended the nature of the threatened danger, the scout, nevertheless, decided that he would take no risks. He, therefore, maintained the same slow and silent approach. Soon he came within striking distance of the outlaw, who, at this moment uttered a deep curse as his cigarette burned his lips, casting the stump of the same to the ground with an angry growl.

That curse was the last of his that ever polluted the air; for the bowie of Big Foot shot forward, glittering through a patch of moonlight, which seemed to shine upon that particular spot to favor the scout's design, and, with a sickening, grating sound, penetrated the neck of the bandit, severing the spinal cord, and producing instant death.

It required the finest calculation and skill to accomplish this, but Big Foot was equal to the occasion; and, at the same instant, he clutched his victim by the collar of the *jaqueta*, thus preventing the corpse from crashing through the branches to the earth.

Quickly descending, he secured the arms of his victim and then stole around through the undergrowth to the east side of the camp, where, by peeping through the bushes, he could see plainly every captive, as well as the only remaining sentinel, who was seated with his back to the east.

The scout had thus far performed his difficult, self-imposed task, upon which so much depended; but he now realized that life and death hung upon his slightest movement, and the most difficult attempt yet remained. Had it been possible, he would have stolen up from the opposite side of the camp in the rear of the captives and cut their bonds; but there being no bushes for some yards to cover his approach, and from the fact that the sentinel was watching intently toward that point—these rendered such an undertaking impossible of accomplishment.

All the Texans were in a heavy, lethargic sleep, except Roy Randolph; and the scout wished that such was the case with him also, as the latter, if suddenly surprised, might betray his presence.

There was only one way to prevent this, and Big Foot at once adopted it. Stepping free from the bushes in the moonlight, he held up his hand in a gesture of caution, and then instantly darted back to the covert, crouching low from view.

This movement caused exactly the result that the scout anticipated. Roy tossed his head quickly, and gazed with the utmost surprise across the camp at the scout. This attracted the attention of the sentinel, who sprung to his feet, and whirled about to discover what it was that had alarmed the captive.

Big Foot was, however, concealed from view, and, providentially, at this moment, an opossum dropped from one limb to another, on the east side of the camp, and directly over the position of the scout, disturbing the branches, and hanging by its tail in plain view.

Satisfied that it was this which had been the cause of the surprise manifested by the captive, the Greaser paid no further attention to the matter, quietly rolling and igniting a cigarette!

Our hero had, in a moment, perceived how foolish he had been, that help was at hand, and that he had very near betrayed the fact and hazarded the safety of some stranger who was evidently bent upon releasing him and his party.

So intense now was Roy's concern for the safety of the mysterious rescuer, that, as he realized the fact that the man was crawling across the camp to slay the sentinel, he could not look in that direction for a time, but bent his gaze to the ground at his feet.

Then, when he felt that he could command himself, he glanced casually around the camp, at no time looking directly toward the creeping form of Big Foot Wallace, who, with knife between his teeth, crawled toward the bandit, his every muscle strained for an instant bound at the slightest indication of the sentinel's discovering him.

This was most excruciating torture to Roy Randolph, who felt that, should the sentinel give an alarm, he and his friends would be brutally murdered by the infuriated outlaws who remained alive, for our hero believed, as was the fact, that the other two sentinels had been slain by this stranger, who was thus risking his life for his countrymen.

Slowly placing hand and knee softly down upon the sward, on came Big Foot Wallace, not betraying that he was aware of the presence of any other human beings than the bandit sentinel.

At length the scout reached the desired position, and half arose from the earth, maintaining a crouching position, his soft sombrero in his left hand, and a glittering bowie in his right.

Thus, for an instant only, during which the face of Roy was pallid as that of a corpse, his features drawn with anxiety and apprehension.

Then, like a famished panther springing upon its prey, the scout bounded across the intervening space, thrusting his sombrero tightly into the mouth of the outlaw, at the same time jerking the head of the doomed man over backward. Then, down through flesh and bone, with sickening sound, the bright bowie crashed in the Greaser's breast, the knife being quickly withdrawn, allowing the hot blood to spurt out into an arch of crimson spray upon the sward.

The next moment Roy Randolph was cut free and stood by the side of Big Foot Wallace, who at once placed a revolver in each of his hands, the eyes of each gazing into those of the other—each, from that instant, knowing that they were to be friends, true and devoted; each conscious that he stood before the noblest work of God, an honest, brave, and true man.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DROPPING INTO THEIR HANDS.

ONLY for an instant stood Big Foot Wallace and Roy Randolph as we have described.

Then the former said, in a low voice:

"Keep ther yaller varmints yunder kivered, pard, an' bore 'em ef they makes a jump fer biz. I'll sorter 'sturb ther see-cstars o' yer frien's hyer, without hev'in 'em spit music, ef hit kin be did."

Without uttering a word in reply, his eyes, however, speaking volumes, Roy whirled about and with a cocked revolver in either hand, stood facing the blanketed forms of the bandits on the north side of the camp, the horses on the opposite side tossing their heads, pricking their ears forward, and gazing with surprise and suspicion upon the proceedings. But the bandits remained undisturbed, he who would probably have been the most liable to awaken—Antonio—being in a deathlike slumber, induced by the privation and fatigue he had undergone since joining the train of Le Grand, when he was on a spying expedition.

Big Foot quickly grasped a gourd of water, and holding the mouth of it directly over the bent neck of one of the young planters, allowed a couple of drops of the cool fluid to descend upon the bare neck, running down the spine.

From one to another the scout went thus, each awakening and staring in the utmost astonishment at Roy, the sleeping bandits, the horses and the huge scout, not at first realizing where they were, but soon recalling the near past, they looked the relief and thankfulness that they felt.

Not one of them made the least outcry, their awakening from deep slumber in so gradual a manner, and the strangeness of the view as they opened their eyes, dazing them.

No sooner were they awake than Big Foot severed their bonds and forced each around the trunk of the tree to which he had been bound, ordering them to sit and rub their cramped limbs, completely hidden from the view of the bandits, should the latter awake.

The scout had secured three revolvers and three knives from the slain sentinels. Two of the former he had given to Roy, the remaining one he gave to Captain Ray, and a knife to each of the three young planters, bidding them remain secreted and silent until called upon to act in case he and Roy were surprised by the

bandits awakening before they were prepared to attend to them.

Leaving Roy as stated and the other Texans as described, Big Foot hastened into the timber, soon returning with the corpse of the first sentinel he had slain, and laid the body beneath the trees to which the captives had been secured. Having placed in this way the three dead outlaws side by side, he procured three lariats from the saddles of the bandits, and securing a noose about the neck of each corpse, drew them up free of the ground, to as many limbs of the trees.

This done, Roy not having once taken his eyes from the sleeping Greasers, the giant scout drew his revolvers, cocked the weapons and made a gesture for our hero to follow him. Springing within the bushes near the concealed Texans, Roy and Big Foot crouched low, selecting positions from which they could quickly bound, if necessary.

All being ready, the scout gave a terrific yell, which caused the seven bandits to bound to their feet, hurling their blankets aside and grasping their weapons; but, as they instinctively gazed toward the place where their captives had been bound, and saw their three comrades hanging by their necks to the limbs—as they saw this unexpected and horrible sight, realizing at once that their captives had escaped, after having murdered the sentinels, they all became ghastly.

Instantly the attention of the bandit chief was attracted to the frantic commotion among the horses, the animals rearing, plunging, and snorting in their fright; and this proved conclusively to Antonio that the hanging up of the sentinels had but just been consummated. Like a flash, the outlaw captain jerked his weapons, and bounded toward cover, yelling for his men to follow.

At this moment, Roy and Big Foot sprung into the camp from their covers, having the Mexicans at a disadvantage; as the latter were speeding toward the east side of the camp, their backs to the Texans.

Then followed a perfect fusillade of revolver shots, the bandits, with yells of terror endeavoring to turn and face their foes; but the leaden hail tore through their bodies, and every Greaser fell, riddled with bullets, except the chief, who sprung, with a wild yell, into the undergrowth, crashing toward the river.

But the avenger was on his track, for Roy recognized him as the driver of the wagon, and knew that the swarthy cut-throat had been one who had aided the miserable Le Grand to foil the would-be rescuers of poor Rosa; perhaps, indeed, had added to her sufferings and dread by his fiendish appearance—perhaps might have even sworn to kill Le Grand, and secure the helpless maiden for his own victim.

These thoughts flashed like lightning through Roy's brain, and changed him to a merciless madman; an avenger, so strengthened and nerved by these thoughts that no man could stand before his furious charge.

Throwing his revolver from him, and grasping a knife from the corpse of a Greaser, Roy Randolph, with a vengeful yell, rushed after the bandit chief; tearing through the undergrowth with a bound like that of a maddened mustang.

Thus on, until the form of Capitan Antonio was within view, when, with a taunting whoop, his knife in air, he darted forward.

Antonio turned his head, glancing in horror over his shoulder, and his face contorted with abject terror and deathly fright, as he saw the determined face of his pursuer who rushed with vengeful and irresistible fury toward him.

Knowing that the Texan would be upon him in a moment, that escape was impossible, except by a plunge into the river, Antonio turned to make the leap; but the strong left hand of our hero clutched his shoulder, whirled him about, and caused him to spin like a top. Then he allowed the wretch to stand facing him, while he gazed into his eyes, as he flashed the knife in circles around the doomed bandit's head.

So rapid had been the movements of Roy, that the Greaser had had no chance to use his knife; but now, by a herculean effort, he controlled himself, gathering his desperate recklessness, and flourishing his knife, while his lips curled away from his white teeth, like those of a wild beast, and his eyes filled with mad rage, and a thirst for blood.

"Fiend! Miscreant! Cut-throat! Assassin! That's right! Show the little spark of dare-devil you possess, for I'm no dastardly murderer like yourself. Strike, coward, strike! That I may not be forced to cut out the heart of an unresisting victim!"

Thus cried out Roy Randolph, in mad fury, Antonio struggling to free himself from the torturing clutch of his adversary, and swinging his arm back, to plunge his long knife.

And the knife cut the air like a lightning stroke; but the blade of Roy was ready, and plunged through the knife hand of the Mexican causing him to utter a howl of agony, as his *cuchillo* dropped to the ground.

"Ha! ha!" burst from Roy's lips, with a blood-curdling meaning to the cowering wretch.

"You are at my mercy! Why, I could have backed you to pieces half a dozen times. Down, dastard!" crushing Antonio to the earth, and placing his knee upon the bandit's breast, at the same time laying the edge of his knife across the throat of the trembling wretch. "Down, I say!"

"Now tell me where is Le Grand, and where is the fair girl whom you two inhuman monsters confined in that wagon and bound like a dog? Speak quick!"

"Will the Senor Capitan spare my life?" gasped the terrified wretch.

"Upon my soul, I never dreamed of it; but if I am convinced that you tell the truth, you shall go. I'll hurl you into the river, and you can take your chances; but you die when next I get my clutch upon you. Out with it! Where is Le Grand, and where is the poor girl whom he stole from her home on the Brazos?"

"Both are on the San Miguel. The senorita escaped from the camp before you reached the river. Senor Le Grand is in search of her. This is true, I call the saints to witness!"

Roy sprung to his feet, jerked the bandit upward, and then, with two dexterous slashes, severed both ears from the head of the howling wretch. The next moment Capitan Antonio was hurled high in the air, out over the undergrowth, and disappeared with a sounding splash beneath the dark rolling waters of the Rio Frio.

"I promised to give you your life, and I have kept my word. When next we meet I shall not fail to recognize you. It is death now, a terrible death, to every miscreant who has been a party to the sufferings of Rosa Ray!"

Like a maniac Roy rushed back to the camp, the blood-dripping ears of the bandit chief between his finger and thumb. He then threw them upon an outspread blanket before Captain Ray, the young planters, and Big Foot Wallace.

"Heaven bless you, my brave and noble friend!" said Roy impulsively, extending his hand to the giant scout.

"Allow me to thank you from my inmost heart for your having braved death so unselfishly to rescue us, strangers to you, from this horde of cut-throats. My name is Leroy Randolph, ever at your service, and anxious to know to whom he is so much indebted."

Roy had been somewhat puzzled at witnessing the looks of respect directed toward the scout by Captain Ray and his young friends; one of whom, as the scout hesitated, spoke up as if proud of the honor, as indeed he was:

"Roy, allow me to introduce to you our preserver, Big Foot Wallace, whose modesty is a fault, for we had no easy task to ascertain to whom we owed our lives."

Again Roy grasped the hand of the scout, seeming too deeply affected to express his pleasure and gratitude; Big Foot exclaiming, in a voice that showed his great embarrassment:

"Hit 'pears ter me thet ye're all makin' a heap o' fuss 'bout wipin' out a few Greasers. I'm chuck-full o' glad ter run ag'in' yer all, 'specially when yer war in a tight box an' needed ther ole man's help. Howsomever, I'm reckonin' thet thar's a power o' biz on hand yit."

"I knows purty much how 'tis 'bout ther leetle gal. I war purty well posted by listenin' ter ther yaller hellyuns. Does yer see thet limb? Wual—"

Big Foot was here interrupted by a shriek of terror, sounding from the very perch that he had occupied when acting the spy, and to which he had just pointed. All now gazed upward in alarm; when, amid a crashing of limbs, a man was seen falling, clutching frantically at moss and foliage.

The next moment he fell with great force to the earth, directly in the midst of the Texans, and there lay, limp and senseless, face downward on the sward.

In an instant Roy rolled the body over, revealing a brutal, deathlike face, contorted with mortal terror. Then our hero yelled:

"Le Grand, the miscreant! The assassin!" as he raised his blood-stained knife over the prostrate man's head.

Captain Ray and Big Foot sprung forward, clutching Roy's arms, the former exclaiming:

"Hold, Roy Randolph! For your life, hold! Kill him and Rosa is lost. He, and he only, can tell where my child is."

"Thet's ther way ther trail p'int's," put in the scout. "We-uns bes ter glide easy er mebbe so we won't find ther leetle gal. Yer kin scarify, skin an' hang ther cuss fer all me arter we scrouges ther gal's locate outen him."

"Tie him up then, and cover him up with a blanket," said Roy in suppressed fury, "or I shall kill him."

Then, fearing he had shown too much feeling, which might be attributed to too deep an interest in Rosa Ray, our hero displayed the wound on his head, saying:

"Gentlemen, you see on my skull the track of a bullet. The wound is fresh and the lead was from the rifle of that coward, who shot me from behind, that being his third attempt to kill me. His last crime, as you know, is more damnable than murder."

"Can you blame me for thirsting for revenge?"

"You shall hev it, pard," said Big Foot, "but fust off we-uns mus' find out what he's did wi' ther leetle gal. I'm opinin' thet he foun' her, brung'd her hyer-a-ways, an' war calkerlatin' fore he tuck ter spyin' onter we-uns ter jine Cap'n Antone."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NEW FOE.

In a moment after Big Foot had spoken Le Grand was bound fast by his former comrades, but the wretch was so terrified that he was still speechless.

No mercy was visible in the stern faces of those into whose power he had fallen so strangely.

He had expected to be stabbed to the heart by Roy Randolph, and he well knew that he was doomed, but he "grasped at the straw" shown him by the words of the scout, for he saw that, by revealing the whereabouts of Rosa Ray, he could for a time prolong his life, and perhaps even yet be rescued.

That one hope he might still cherish, for he knew that a number of the bandits were absent when the release of the Texans was effected and he looked for their return.

As the wretch recovered somewhat from his dread terror and his mind became clearer, his old defiant spirit in a measure asserted its sway, and he resolved that, as there was but a faint prospect of his escaping death, he would use the power he possessed by forcing his captors to promise that they would spare his life in the event of his leading them to Rosa Ray.

He had no doubt that Antonio still lived, although terribly mutilated by Roy, but, although he felt sure that the bandit chief would be insanely desperate, would risk life to avenge himself on Roy Randolph, yet he himself could not expect that Antonio would lift a finger toward rescuing him, as he had been the direct means of the destruction and death of the band by bribing their leader to serve him in his plan of escaping with Rosa and consummating a marriage with her.

After Le Grand had been secured, Big Foot, Roy and Captain Ray held a consultation, while the three young planters secured the arms of the dead bandits, and also their own, which had been taken from them when captured.

The horses they had ridden were separated from those of the Mexicans, and removed to another "open" near at hand; the camp plunder being "cached" in a dense thicket at some distance to the east. They then all partook of a hearty meal from the stores of the outlaws, for they were nearly famished.

The meal being finished, several lariats were secured, and at the suggestion of Big Foot Wallace, all of the slain were hanged by the neck to the limbs of the trees on the margin of the opening, as a warning to the remainder of the gang, who might return to the camp, although they had resolved that the bandits, who had departed under the guidance of Double Dan, should die. In other words, that the band of Capitan Antonio should be "wiped out, slick an' clean," as Big Foot expressed it.

Both Roy and Captain Ray were in terrible mental torture during these preparations. They wished to immediately force Le Grand to reveal the whereabouts of Rosa; but Big Foot had insisted upon this slight delay, reasoning that Le Grand, when he had had a little time to recover from his fright, and witnessing the hanging up of the bloody corpses of the bandits, would be more likely to tell the truth in the matter.

"Ther cuss's life ain't woth shucks," the scout had reasoned; "an' when yer bes let his bestest bleed out, sendin' him ter Tophet suddint-like, ther chances 'll be thin ter locate ther leetle gal."

"Fact air, she mought git tore'd by panther-cats, er some sich critters, while we-uns war stompin' 'roun' huntin' her. Yeou 'low me ter work this hyer game wi' ther condemned kiote, an' I'll do hit, soon es things air straightened."

And it took but a very short time, under the giant scout's directions, to "straighten things" as described. Then, followed by Roy and the captain, Big Foot approached the spot where lay Le Grand, pallid as the dead, but determined to carry his point as he had decided; that is, that he would refuse to reveal the whereabouts of Rosa Ray, unless they promised to spare his life.

"Now, yer black-skinned, skulkin' coward, an' stealer o' innocent gals!" exclaimed the scout, as he grasped Le Grand by the collar, and stood him upon his feet. "Now, what hev yer did wi' this hyer ole man's darlin' darter. Spit hit out squar', er we'll skin yer alive, an' hang yer up wi' ther yaller scum o' ther Grandee, what, ef anythin', air a heap more decenter an' 'spectable than yeou, that war foted up ter be civerlized!"

"Thar's no time ter scout 'roun' ther bush. Talk straight an' lively, er say a pray, an' git ready ter go hum ter yer master wi' ther huffs an' long tail!"

Roy and Captain Ray stood, with folded arms, as if they dared not trust their hands

near their weapons. But both had promised the giant scout that they would leave the matter in his hands.

Not for an instant did Le Grand hesitate. He answered promptly, in a hoarse, unnatural voice:

"Promise, gentlemen, that you will spare my life, and I will lead you to Rosa Ray. I know that you have decided that I shall die by your hands, and that to-night, and I would be a fool to confer a favor upon those who would, the next moment, torture me to death."

"I swear that I will tell you nothing, unless I have your promise that you will spare my life, and set me at liberty, when you behold the one you seek. Now, do your worst!"

"Either promise to let me go free, or doom the girl to a horrible death, by starvation, or wild beasts; for she is fast bound, beyond the power of getting free, and secreted where you will never find her!"

Roy grated his set teeth, his eyes glaring, and his form trembling with the intensity of his most furious longing to cut the wretch to pieces; and Captain Ray groaned aloud, as, in his mind's eye, he beheld his beautiful and loved child, bound in a cruel manner, in a wild spot, and with savage and hungered beasts crawling toward her. He even imagined he could hear her piteous, agonizing shrieks for help, and he cried out:

"Lead us to my child, for God's sake! Lead on! We promise everything!"

"Yes," agreed Roy; "lead on! I promised Capitan Antonio his life, and he has it, but—"

With a firm tread, Roy stole back and forth, as if to relieve his almost ungovernable fury; Le Grand failing to note that last significant "but" of his.

Steeping quickly, Big Foot severed the cords which bound the miscreant's ankles, drew his revolvers, and placed the cold muzzle against the back of the wretch's neck. He then said:

"All right! Ther boys bes said hit. Lead on; an' ef yer gits in any funny biz on us, yer'll be a perforated perrarer pirut ther next breathe!"

"Hev we-uns gut ter take ter our critters, er huff hit?"

"It is not far. We can walk," replied Le Grand, striding from the camp, westward, along a path near the stream; followed by the scout, Roy, and the three young planters.

Nearly three-fourths of the distance between the bandit camp and the thicket, where Le Grand had left Rosa Ray bound, and more dead than alive, had been passed, when suddenly Big Foot clutched the villain by the collar of his coat, and jerked him backward, holding him in an iron grip; causing the wretch to cringe and quiver with terror, expecting his death-blow. He would have uttered a cry of fright and remonstrance, had not the scout clasped his broad hand tightly over his mouth.

At the same time, Big Foot turned his head, and gave a snake-like hiss, causing all to halt suddenly; and then, slowly and silently, to crawl forward, in the utmost amazement and wonder.

"Thar's somethin' wrong ahead, pards," whispered the giant scout, in a warning manner. "Roy, tell yer young frien's thar ter hold onter this bellyun, while yeou, an' ther cap'n, an' me kinder 'vestergates things. Ef thar ain't a war party o' 'Paches within two shoots, I'm a roarin', ravin' afferdavy-buster!"

"What causes you to think so?" inquired Roy, anxiously; while Captain Ray stretched forward to listen to the answer, in the greatest apprehension.

Le Grand was held tightly by the young planters, one holding each arm, and the third standing in front of him with revolver presented at his breast. But there seemed no need for it; for all strength appeared to have left the wretch at the mention of Apaches, he being now unable to stand without assistance.

Big Foot sunk to the earth, and placed his ear upon the bottom sward, rising quickly; then, in the same cautious, much concerned manner, returned.

"I know'd hit! Leastways I war ormighty certain; an' now I kin hear ther stompin' o' thar critters, an' a big b'dlin' on 'em air comin' on et a gallop!"

"What caused you to suppose them to be Indians?" asked Roy. "For God's sake, let us go on, or Rosa will be discovered by the red fiends, if you are right in what you say!"

"I doesn't s'pose hit—I knows hit!" said Big Foot, in some impatience. "Reckon I knows ther sound o' Injun nags. Reds doesn't ride like white men, straight an' squar', but every which way; sorter flighty an' oneven. But come on! We'll strike fer ther edge o' ther timber, an' mighty soon find out."

Seeming to have been struck with a sudden idea, the scout, however, whirled about, and placed himself directly in front of Le Grand, whispering:

"See byer, yer cantankerous cuss; how far from this air ther leetle gal? Spit it in a baby whisper, er I'll spit yer wizen!"

"Not more than a rifle-shot," answered the miscreant in a choking whisper.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem!" growled Big Foot, as

he whirled about and stole stealthily forward, with a hiss of caution to Roy and the captain.

In a very short space of time our three friends reached the border of the timber, the same being curved northward, allowing a clear view west along the timber-line, and the open plain beyond.

All parted the bushes, after sinking upon their knees; the scout giving a whispered warning.

The sight that met their gaze was appalling.

Full three-score of hideous paint-daubed Apache braves were within view—those in the lead, who had made halt, being but a rifle-shot off—two-thirds of them yet galloping in an irregular manner down the margin of the timber, and apparently greatly excited in regard to the halt of those in the lead.

Their half-wild steeds were prancing and snorting, and the outer braves in the front were pointing with their quirts toward the plain, along the grass, which grew tall and rank by the timber, and for some distance from it being covered now with a heavy dew. In another moment half a dozen warriors had sprung from their mustangs, and passed the jaw-strap to their fellow-braves; and then, half-bent, they glanced along the top of the grass toward the plain, afterward turning about and entering the timber, their knives glittering in their clutch.

"Pards," whispered Big Foot quickly, "ther red heathun hev diskivered ther trail o' ther cuss, Le Grand, when he come from ther San Miguel; by ther dew bein' brushed offen ther grass."

"They'll mos' likely find Rosa; but ef yer ever hopes ter resky her, don't yer make idgits o' yerselves, an' lunge cut er breathe hard. If yer does, hit's by-by, an' a speedy trip ter kingdom come!"

As the scout ceased whispering, a most piercing shriek of horror shot through the timber, and at the same instant Big Foot sprung upon Roy Randolph and Captain Ray, gathering the clothing at the back of the neck of each in a vise-like grip, while he planted a knee in the middle of each man's spine.

And well it was that he did so, for both were gathering themselves to bound from the thicket toward the point whence the cry proceeded, regardless of the scores of war-painted fiends in their front.

That fearful shriek tore through their very souls, for they knew it was from the lips of her whom they sought, and called forth by the hideous Apaches, who were now bending over her, and gazing into her fair face with hellish exultation.

"Dang my ole heart, ef I doesn't put a chunk o' lead plum through the brains o' both on yer!" growled Big Foot, as he held the panting, struggling men down. "I know'd yer'd make idgits o' yerselves. I'd rather bore yer, than hev ther Patch torturers git yer!"

"Lay low, an' listen ter me, er I sw'ar hit'll be woss fer yer! I'll git ther leetle gal from ther bellyuns, ef yer'll only keep cool. Air yer goin' ter afferdavy on hit? Don't breathe hard, er we're all goners anyway!"

Had not the captain and Roy been outstretched on the ground, a position which Big Foot had been careful to instruct them to take, the scout, gigantic and powerful though he was, would not have been able to have prevented them from bounding from the undergrowth into plain view of the Apaches, in an insane attempt to rescue Rosa at the sound of the harrowing shriek which she uttered; and, as it was, the strength of the scout would not have been equal to the task of holding them down more than a few moments.

However, his prompt action and strength saved them from a terrible death; his words, and their own reasonings prompted by those words, causing them to realize the dread and awful fate they had so narrowly escaped, and the idiotic madness they had allowed, for the moment, to rule them.

CHAPTER XXX.

CAPTURED BY APACHES.

"Hit fills me full o' glad ter see yer come back ter reasonerle sense," said Big Foot, as Roy and Captain Ray assured him that they were ready to follow his directions; "fer thar's a call fer a heap o' solid hoss sense, an' pure 'sand,' an' panther-cat mancooverin', ter git ther leetle gal outen ther clutches o' ther red heathun!"

"Hit's enough ter make a pilgrim chaw his years off wi' hyderphobic indig', ter think what a heap o' hellishness hev bin piled onter yer darter, cap'n; an' what she's a-sufferin' now. But hit can't be helped jist yit. I'm opinin' thet ther sight o' ther painted skunks tuck her sense erway; an' ef so, she ain't bein' tortured now by lookin' et ther snake-eyed, greasy whoopers."

"I hes started in ter fix things squar' wi' yer, an' I never bucks. Ef yer hes confederence inter me, takin' inter sideration what yer has heard o' me, an' see'd o' my doin's, so fur, say so by a grip o' my paw, an' I'll low yer ter meander wi' me. Ef not, I shell lunge out ter run this thing, erlone."

"I'm goin' ter git Rosa 'way from ther bellyuns, er git my head skinned a-tryin'. Ef yer boun' ter go on makin' idgits o' yerselves, an' get tuck an' tortured, I can't helpit; though hit'll bother me a heap."

"I shell save ther leetle gal, an' ef yer wants a hand in ther game, foller me lively, without kickin' sticks, er brushin' bush ter count!"

Both Roy and Captain Ray were now almost beside themselves with hopeless despair, but the words of the giant scout impressed them greatly.

There was no other way but to wait, and do all in their power to aid him in what seemed to be an utter impossibility.

There seemed no hope; in fact, it appeared madness to make any attempt to rescue the most unfortunate and deeply-wronged maiden from her terrible position.

That six men could accomplish anything against sixty fierce Apaches, even to the extent of avoiding capture and death themselves, seemed absurd to think of; but from what the scout had already done, and from the tales of his skill and prowess which they had heard recounted far away on the Brazos, they felt that he could do wonders in the present case, that he understood the situation much better than they did, and that he would not assert so positively that he would save Rosa—thus raising hope in their breasts—unless he had good reasons, or had already formed a feasible plan for its accomplishment.

Consequently both men grasped the hands of the scout, and wrung them in heartfelt gratitude, expressing thus the trust which their lips could not utter, so deep was their anxiety and anguish.

"Foller me!"

Thus spoke Big Foot Wallace, as he stole silently back to the place where they had left Le Grand and the three young planters.

"Jark thet condemned cuss erlong, an' ef he starts chin music, jab yer stickers through ther bestest part o' his natemy. Come on!"

With these words the giant scout led the way, all stealing after him, to the bandit camp, the planters forcing Le Grand in the rear, and the latter trembling in abject terror, for he realized that he had now no hope—that all chance to preserve his life had been taken from him by the Indians—for he had heard the shriek of Rosa Ray, and he understood its cause, as much through the looks and actions of Big Foot as aught else.

When the border of the camp was reached, the scout paused, and turning, spoke directly to Roy and Captain Ray.

"Pards, yer wants ter work lively, ef yer'e goin' ter help me in this biz. Lead our critters from yunder, whar we left 'em, ter ther river. Take yer frien's 'long ter help, an' lay low 'tother side ther drink, until yer sees me."

"I'll fix this hyer cuss," he said, grasping Le Grand, "so he won't be lible ter pester any civerlized human ag'in, er steal innercent gals from thar dads an' huns. Hump yerselves fer ther critters, an' no noise! Arter yer gits 'cross, lead ther nags 'way from ther drink, er ther reds mought hear 'em; fer ther heathun'll be hyeraways in 'bout fifteen minnits by ther moon."

Without a word the five men glided toward the horses to carry out the orders of the scout; for they saw that not only their lives, but the life of Rosa depended upon Big Foot Wallace.

The latter dragged Le Grand toward the swaying corpses of the bandits, the miserable wretch being so appalled and horror-stricken by a nameless dread, knowing that some awful doom was in store for him, yet unable to imagine the character of it.

The movements of the scout were rapid. He secured a lariat, and attaching the end of it to the belt of Le Grand behind, tied a knot even with his neck. Taking a turn around it, Big Foot then tied the rope under the knot that he had previously made, running the slack over a limb, between two of the dead bandits.

Hauling Le Grand up, free from the ground, the scout made the lariat fast, and the trembling wretch hung in almost precisely the same position as the corpses around him, the turn about his neck forcing his head into an unnatural position, the same as though he were really being hanged, yet not choking him, his weight being supported by his belt.

So filled with horror and dread was the miserable man, that he could not utter the pleading prayers for life, though he strove with all his strength to do so.

"So long, Mister Le Grand!" said Big Foot, as he stepped back, and viewed his work. "I reckon this air ther las' time we shell ever gaze et each other in this worl', er ther nex'; fer I doesn't opine ther good Lord air goin' ter sen' me ter ther same place in ther great hyerarter, es yeou bees 'bout ter locate inter. I'm bettin' heavy yer won't shoot another man from ahindt, er steal another gal from her ole dad."

"Ag'in I ses, 'so long'. Ther reds'll gi'n yer a big circus, I reckon, 'fore soon; an', es ye're in 'mong ther dead-heads, hit won't cost yer a picayune!"

With a mocking gesture of adieu, Big Foot Wallace stalked from the bandit camp.

Then Le Grand realized fully his horrible doom.

A horde of Apaches were in the vicinity, and would find the camp, discover that he was alive, and would then torture him to death.

All his worthless and criminal life passed before him in review; and his eyes bulged in horror as, at times, the corpses, twisted around on the lariats, seemed to fix their glassy eyes upon him, exulting in his ignominious fate.

The giant scout strode but a few paces from the camp, and then sprung into a tree, and disappeared among the moss and foliage. He was now in his old perch, reviewing the camp below him.

But a short time elapsed, when he discovered the tufted head of a warrior on the north side of the "open," peering through. But it was only for an instant. Then, the crashing of bushes betrayed the fact that the brave, filled with superstitious horror at the unexpected, and, even to him, terrible sight, was bounding on, as though the bad spirits of his traditions were at his heels, to reveal his startling discovery.

Big Foot would have invited Roy to accompany him to his station in the tree; but he feared, that if Rosa Ray should be conveyed into the camp among the hideous Apaches, the frenzied young man would bound down to her rescue, and his own death.

A moment after the sudden and speedy departure of the Indian spy, the scout discovered a most fearful object—one which caused him to start, and to utter a grunt of extreme astonishment.

Not a sound came from beyond the screen of timber that shut out the plain, the Apaches being evidently engaged in examining "sign."

What Big Foot perceived was nothing else than the creeping form of Capitan Antonio.

From each side of the bandit chief's head, where the ears had been close severed, ran tiny streams of blood, and his clothing and long black hair were dripping with water; while his eyes flashed fury, and a longing for revenge.

On, slowly, he crept, his wolfish gaze fixed upon the swaying form of Louis Le Grand, whom he had undoubtedly recognized by his garb; and noticing not the mutilated forms of his followers. By the terror filled eyes of his former employer, Antonio knew that he still lived.

Still, on glided the mutilated bandit chief, insane with a craving for revenge and blood; and, before half the distance had been passed between the border of the "open," Big Foot beheld some two-score of feather-bedizened heads break slowly from the foliage, around the north and east borders of the camp—their position showing that they were on hands and knees.

Only sufficiently far beyond the leafy screen to gain a full view of them; yet the scout could plainly see their looks of superstitious awe at the suspended gory forms, and the creeping, earless human being.

Inured from childhood to scenes of cruelty, torture, and blood, as had been these Apaches; never before had such an impressive, strange, and unearthly view been presented to their dumfounded vision.

Big Foot knew that this was all an inexplicable enigma to the savages, and he was rejoiced at the arrival of the bandit chief at so opportune a time; as, if the Indians had come up previous to this, and examined the camp, they would have at once decided that there was a strong force of enemies in the vicinity, indeed close at hand.

This fortunate arrival of the bandit chief would distract the attention of the Apaches for a time and serve to explain the presence of Rosa Ray alone in the thicket. They would reason that the earless man had placed her there, thus preventing an immediate search of the bottom.

Had no one turned up in this way, the scout knew that the war-party would have immediately searched the undergrowth up and down the river, and although too dark to discover the "sign" and follow the same, would probably cross the stream, and then he and his friends would all fall into their power.

Big Foot had hopes of something occurring that would favor the release of Rosa, and he realized that the coming of Antonio was providential indeed, for he knew that but a score of braves were on the plain and that these were hampered by having to hold the mustangs of those who were now viewing the camp.

This, then, was a most propitious time to make a dash and rescue Rosa; but the scout felt that a more favorable time would soon come, for he believed that the Apaches would not allow Antonio to murder Le Grand, but would capture and torture them both.

The strangeness of the scene evidently so confounded the Indians that for the moment they were incapable of reason or action, and it was no wonder.

The number of blood-smeared dead, all swaying at the ends of lariats from limbs of the trees; the presence of one who was apparently hanged in the same manner, but still alive, and the mutilated and bleeding Mexican, who crept

along, evidently bent upon finishing the last of his victims; all this, in its ghastly details in the weird moonlight was well calculated to breed superstitious wonder and fear in the minds of the savage observers.

But Big Foot knew that these feelings would not long rule the Apaches to the extent of preventing their taking action in the premises; that they would not allow two men to be lost to them by permitting one to slay the other, and then bound away into the river, upon their springing toward him.

Still in the same slow, panther-like way, Antonio approached Le Grand, not seeming to notice the Apaches.

Still on, until he was within ten feet of his intended victim—the man who had been the prime cause of his mutilation and the death of the better portion of his most trusted followers.

Then the bandit chief half-raised, crouching upon his knees, his eyes fixed upon the horror-filled orbs of Le Grand, whose form quivered from head to foot at this new terror that menaced him.

Thus for an instant, then, as he gathered himself for a bound, a piercing yell of exultation shooting from his brutal lips, there came a rush of pained, bronzed Apaches, and Captain Antonio, the bandit chief, and his intended victim were surrounded—in the very center of the hellish horde.

Then Louis Le Grand was quickly cut free from the limb and Antonio bound fast by his side.

CHAPTER XXXI. RESCUE OF ROSA.

BIG FOOT WALLACE waited no longer, for no sooner did he witness the rush of the Apaches, the binding of Antonio and the cutting down of Le Grand from the limb, than he knew that longer delay was dangerous—that the Indians would at once commence an investigation of the mystery of the bandit camp, for they would reason that other parties had been connected with the slaying and hanging up of the Mexicans, for it was absurd to think that the earless man had accomplished this alone and unaided.

Not only this, but, as he was a Mexican, they would argue that he had been in the fight in which the others had been slain, that the dead were his friends, and that the white man (Le Grand) had been one of the successful side in the conflict, but had fallen and been captured by Antonio, who had intended to torture and kill him.

This, without doubt, would be the conclusion of the Apaches upon reflection, and they would search directly for the remainder of the whites.

That Antonio and Le Grand would be tortured Big Foot had no doubt, and that both deserved such a fate, horrible as it was, he was also positive.

The present state of affairs relieved Captain Ray and Roy Randolph from further thoughts of revenge upon the miscreant for whom they had been in search; but the present dread condition of the poor maiden nerved the scout to immediate action. He therefore took advantage of the puzzled state of the Apaches, who were examining the camp, to steal noiselessly, from branch to branch, toward the river, and over the same in like manner, soon reaching the most intensely excited party whom he had left in charge of the horses.

"Skute fer yer critters lively!" ordered Big Foot, in a low, deep voice that proved him to be in a most desperate frame of mind. "Ther red hellyuns air, 'bout two-thirds on 'em, 'zamin' ther camp, an' hev gut Le Grand an' Cap'n Antone kerral'd."

"We-uns must risk ha'r in a stompede, an' charge 'mong ther 'Paches t'other side ther timber fer ter git Rosa outen thar clutches. All 'pends on brash, devil-may-care rush et chain-lightnin' speed, with a heap of ole he yell an' shootin' chucked in. Hit's gut ter be did right erway, an' we-uns hev gut ter make a rip-snotin' break toward ther San Miguel er leave our carkisses ter be hacked an' skinned by ther condemned torturers, an' fer ther kiotes ter gnaw arterwards, 'sides leavin' Rosa ter worse than thet."

"Skutel jumpstock, an' foller me!"

Our friends knew that this was a time for acts, not words, and perceiving that they were about to make a most desperate and daring attempt to rescue Rosa, and that there was but one chance in a hundred for success, each strove his best to carry out to the letter every instruction of the celebrated scout, whom they knew to be their only hope, as well as that of poor Rosa.

In a brief space of time the six whites had passed up the river to a safe distance, forded the same, and in single file made their way in a stealthy manner, led by Big Foot, to the northern border of the bottom timber, at a point just west of the bandit camp, which now swarmed with Indians.

Drawing up in line, side by side, at the low order of the giant scout, all leaned forward and peered out upon the silent moonlit plain.

Right below their position, to the east, at the entrance to the bandit camp, and some fifty yards from the timber, were nearly a score of painted braves, seeming to be very impatient

in regard to the proceedings in the camp, which they were debarred from witnessing, as they were guarding against surprise from the plain, and were the appointed custodians of their fair captive.

Roy and the captain could not suppress the low groans of bitter anguish that racked their brains and hearts, for, in plain view was poor Rosa, lying upon a robe that had been spread upon the sward. No observer, at that distance, would have had the least doubt that she was a corpse, so ghastly and deathlike was her face as seen in the silvery moonlight.

Seemingly lifeless she lay, an arm thrown out from her body on either side, limp and still, and as if carved from alabaster.

But few warriors were near her, and these were dismounted and lounging upon the sward, the remainder of the party sitting their horses nearer the line of timber, their faces turned in that direction, and their senses strained to detect what was transpiring beyond the thick screen of trees and undergrowth. The protracted silence in the bandit camp, whither so many of their comrades had gone, puzzled them; especially from the fact that all were made aware by the report of the spy, that ruled in the camp he had discovered.

All this was taken in by Big Foot, and the favorableness of an attempted rescue at once was indicated. He, therefore, waited not an instant, knowing that the fate of Rosa, and the lives of themselves depended upon immediate action.

His orders were soon given. In a hoarse whisper, all bending toward him to catch his every word, the scout said:

"Pard Roy, you air the pilgrim I hev picked fer ther speshul purpose o' pintin' straight fer ther leetle gal, an' scoopin' her up in ther way of a hummin'-bird's wing. Ye're young an' strong, an' her dad must keep 'longside o' me, fer I daren't trust him arter her."

"We'll all go in a line, wi' sixes gripped, an' lead a-flyin' inter red meat at every jump. Grab ther kaliker, an' jab spurs toward the open per-rarer. We-uns'll kiver yer, keepin' 'tween yer an' ther howlin' sons of Satan."

"Steady now, an' 'member that ther leetle gal air woss'n tortered, an' we-uns air gone coons ef we make a miss one't. Ready all! Kiver yer spurs wi' bleed ther fust jab, an' don't waste a bullet. Steady on yer reins! Grip shooters! Now, git!"

The six daring and desperate Texans drove spurs home as one, and the animals with snorts of pain, bounded from the undergrowth, thundering down upon the red fiends like an avalanche of vengeance; spurts of flame, rattling reports, and a hurtling rain of lead, bewildering and tearing through the dumfounded, unprepared Apaches.

Before the braves could comprehend what had occurred and the character of their foes, half of their number lay pierced through the vitals by the fusillade of the irresistible Texans, who had dashed directly through the Indians. They then whirled their steeds on a return charge, before weapons were in readiness for use in the hands of the red-men. As they did so, they gave a round of exultant yells, for they perceived that Roy had accomplished his purpose and was dashing at headlong speed toward the San Miguel, with Rosa Ray clasped to his breast. They saw too, near the robe where the maiden had lain, the corpses of four warriors, slain by the young man in his wild rush to the rescue of the unconscious girl.

On after Roy the Texans sped, delivering a galling volley as they dashed in quartering course from their previous charge, into the demoralized half-score of Apaches, who appalled by the avalanche of death that had been hurled upon them in so sudden and unexpected a manner, dashed toward the timber, many falling by the way.

But before the few survivors reached the friendly shades, out from the same rushed, in a frenzy of rage and fury, the warriors from the camp—all except four, who had been left to guard Antonio and Le Grand.

Upon discovering the slain all halted, gazing over the plain at their fast flying foes and their recent captive; then the taunting yell and war-cry of Big Foot Wallace brought them to their senses. But it was impossible for them to pursue at once, for the horses of the war-party had nearly all been stamped into the timber by the mad charge of the Texans.

Thoroughly demoralized by the strange sights and occurrences and the wholesale slaughter, the Apaches rushed here and there after their mustangs; and our friends were at least a mile away when the long line of Apache braves lashed their animals in mad pursuit, all insanely eager for revenge, and determined upon the recapture of the white squaw and the death of those who had slain such a number of their braves.

And on galloped Roy Randolph, clasping his darling to his breast. Was she dead? Had he been too late? Had her pure spirit flown from the scenes of her earthly suffering? So, indeed, it seemed. And Roy groaned in anguish almost unendurable; the speed which he was obliged to keep up preventing him from deciding

whether there was any pulsation in the heart of the long tortured maiden.

When our hero reviewed the dread and most horrible experience of Rosa, since she had saved his life on the Brazos only a few days past, he was forced to the conclusion that but few of womankind were so constituted that they could survive what she had undergone.

Then he became desperate; and recalling the fact that he had a canteen of water secured to the cantle of his saddle, he turned and tore the same loose with a desperate twitch, tore out the cork with his teeth, and poured the contents over the head and between the lips of Rosa Ray.

Totally unconscious was Roy in his deep and frantic grief, in the state of mind produced by this fearful uncertainty in regard to Rosa, of the position of his friends and the fiendish Apaches behind them. His whole mind and soul were bound up in the fair, deathlike maiden in his arms, who, as she seemed to have been called from earth, was dearer to him than ever—dearer than his own soul!

Great beads of perspiration, drawn there by his mental agony, stood out upon his forehead, now unshaded by sombrero—that having been lost in the fierce struggle to gain his darling—and his eyes were fixed upon her face, watching to catch some symptoms of returning consciousness, some indication that life had not flown forever.

If this were so, then he was desolate and hopeless, a human waif upon a trackless desert; thus to roam until God saw fit to call him to join her whither she had gone.

Ah! what a paradise a trackless desert would be were she but with him!

He bent his face yet closer. Again he dashed a spray of water over her features. Then from his lips sprung a wild cry of soul-felt joy—such as might be given by a condemned man on the scaffold, who should receive a pardon while the terrible, ignominious rope was about his neck.

That cry was given as Roy detected the quiver of the eyelids, and felt a convulsive shudder run through the form he clasped; and the cry of Roy seemed to pierce her brain, calling her soul back to its clay tenement. Her eyes opened, and one hand was quickly pressed upon her brow, her very soul seeming to be in her eyes as she looked up in Roy's face.

Then the hand that pressed her brow went tremblingly through the air, followed by the other; and soon, both the fair arms were about the neck of our hero.

"Roy! Roy! Oh, my God, I thank Thee!"

Down fell the head of the young man, as she uttered these words, his lips meeting hers; and when at length he spoke, it was to echo her thanksgiving.

But at this moment of supreme bliss to both, the sound of fire-arms, and fierce yells, in their rear, brought both to a realization of their true situation, and that they were, as yet, "not out of the woods."

Notwithstanding her condition of mind and body, enfeebled by all that she had undergone, and the feeling of safety that had been hers for a moment, the shots and yells brought back all the old terror; and, clinging to Roy, she cried out, with a shudder:

"Oh, Roy, darling, I remember all! Those terrible Indians captured me, and you have saved me from them. Yes, and there I see my poor papa! Oh, tell me, tell me, is there any hope of escape?"

Our hero gave one look backward, his face filled with a murderous expression, as he replied:

"Those red devils shall not capture you again, Rosa! I feel the strength of a dozen men now; and, should we come again to close quarters with them, I'll cut the hearts from a score of their paint-daubed breasts!"

"We have the advantage—a great advantage—and shall escape; thanks to Big Foot Wallace. We owe all to him, to that noble and daring scout; and when I forget him, may you, my Rosa, forget that such a man as Leroy Randolph ever lived!"

CHAPTER XXXII. RE ENFORCED.

"BUT, Roy, do you not think our friends in danger? Is not poor papa liable to be hit with those terrible arrows at any moment? I can see the steel points glint in the moonlight."

"Our friends are so far safe, Rosa, thank Heaven! The Indians being directly behind them and us, causes them to appear nearer than they really are. We shall cross the San Miguel before the red fiends get near enough to do any execution with their arrows; and I do not believe they will dare venture beyond that stream."

"I do hope it may prove as you say, Roy. Oh, the horrors, the anguish, the unspeakable agony that I have passed through of late! It almost drives me insane to think of it, and I can hardly realize that I am free once more. Oh, Roy! What will papa think? Has he learned anything, or does he suspect anything, think you?"

"I know not, Rosa; nor do I care. Captain Ray, however, is a sensible man—as is natural

for the father of such daughter to be—and he and I are certain to be firm friends for life; but I do not think that he suspects anything, or has the least idea that we have ever met before to-night."

"And that horrible Le Grand?" questioned the maiden, with a shudder. "Where is he?"

"Where he will get his just deserts," was the reply. "He is a captive to the Apaches, as is also Antonio, who was the driver of the wagon that served as your prison; but we will speak of these things hereafter. I will merely say that Le Grand will never again trouble either of us; for he will undoubtedly be put to death, by some fearful torture, at the hands of the Indians."

"How far in our rear are our friends now, Rosa? I shall dart into the camp, in two minutes, from which you escaped, from the wagon. The San Miguel is close at hand."

"Papa and the other gentlemen are closing up," answered Rosa, in a relieved tone of voice; "they have been reserving the strength of the animals, and are now coming at terrific speed."

"And the Apaches?"

"They are lashing their mustangs unmercifully. Oh! how horrible those red demons appear in the moonlight! They seem frantic with fury, and show no indications of giving up the race."

"They have lost many braves by our bullets, Rosa, and they may possibly chase us beyond the San Miguel. They are insanely eager for revenge; but we will escape them, be assured."

The instant that Roy ceased speaking, his horse dashed into the bottom timber of the San Miguel, thence on into the ford, and across the same; when our hero halted for a moment, at Rosa's request, but spurred on, as Big Foot impatiently signaled him to proceed. The scout, Captain Ray, and the young planters now dashed down into and over the ford as quickly as possible.

Roy disappeared from view with Rosa, and Big Foot ordered a halt, shouting his orders to his comrades:

"Jerk out yer long shooters, an' plant every chunk o' lead inter red meat, an' then skute ag'in! Ther hellyuns air chuck full o' hyderphobic, an' bankers fer bleed an' ha'r; but I doesn't reckon they'll dar' run us fur t'other side o' hyeraways. Thar comes ther painted piruts! Drap 'em arter they gits in ther middle o' ther drink!"

As the giant scout thus spoke, the horde of Apaches lashed their snorting, panting, foam-flecked mustangs from the undergrowth on the opposite side of the river, down the bank and into the waters, with a sounding splash and spatter; their snake-like eyes striving to penetrate the foliage in their front, which they probably suspected screened their white foes from view.

Their suspicions were quickly changed to actual and most forcibly proved fact; for the simultaneous discharge of five revolvers as one, rung through the arches of the timber, and as many braves gave horrible howls. Three of them with upthrown arms fell over the hams of their mustangs into the rolling river, and two more sunk forward reeling in their saddles, while they clutched at the manes of their terrified steeds to prevent themselves from falling, in a desperately wounded state, into the stream.

The yell of madness and vengeance that came from the bronzed throats of the survivors was terrific, and caused the blood to chill in the veins of Captain Ray and the young planters, as, at the order of Big Foot, they again poured a volley of bullets into the desperately infuriated savages. The latter now lashed their steeds through the waters; their eyes blazing with a thirst for blood, scalps and victims for the torture.

Again our friends drove spurs, soon clearing the timber, and discovering Roy and Rosa on the plain ahead, galloping fast toward the Rio Medina and safety.

But these were not all that they saw; for, on to the north of the fast-riding pair, and not two miles distant, were the wagons of Le Grand; doubtless driven by the slaves, who had all, probably, been captured by the bandits of San Miguel, who had been sent for the purpose by Antonio, under the leadership of Double Dan.

Big Foot no sooner discovered the wagon-train than he galloped quickly in the rear, toward the ford that they had just crossed.

The Apaches, yelling like fiends, were just lashing their animals from the timber in pursuit; this fact causing the giant scout to give a yell of satisfaction and delight. Then he cried out:

"Pards, jist gaze yunder! Thar comes ther wagons, an' ther t'others o' Cap'n Antone's gang. We-uns must kinder hedge 'em in, an' keep 'em on thar reg'lar gait; shovin' 'em up on thar half-shell, fur ther 'Paches ter sculp an' tortur'. Ef we kin, we must save ther niggers."

"This air jist ther bestest kind o' fun, an' things air comin' out purty es a pink. Dang my eyes, ef thar ain't a few ranchers arter ther wagons an' Greasers! Thet'll save we-uns the trouble o' roundin' in on ther yaller scums. Le's skute a leetle more east'ard. Roy, I see, hes tuck ther siterwation in, an' is playin' his beads right whar they b'long."

As the words of the old scout proved, his pards saw the wagons and a party of horsemen; the latter galloping alongside the mules, and urging their animals at headlong speed; while, in the rear of the train, on in seeming pursuit, dashed a half-dozen riders, also spurring at terrific speed.

It was evident to our friends, that neither of the approaching parties had observed the Apaches; although the bandits had caused the train to be turned more westerly, to avoid contact with the Texans under Big Foot Wallace, and prevent themselves from being hemmed in by enemies.

Roy, knowing well that the Mexicans with the wagons would endeavor to shoot him and recapture Rosa for their chief, spurred his horse to greater speed, turning more to the eastward.

If the Texans from the Medina joined him, Big Foot was confident that they could not only hold their own, but give the Indians heavy punishment. He hoped, however, to be able to turn the latter upon the bandits; thus pitting the two parties of their foes against each other.

Although the savages were insanely eager for revenge, the scout believed that, when they discovered more Texans beyond the wagons, they would give up pursuit, and attack the train, that they might secure the mules and the stores with which it was probably laden.

These conclusions were fulfilled to the letter; and, in ten minutes after swerving to the east, the Texans from the Rio Medina joined our friends, Roy and Rosa included; and all sat their horses on the moonlit plain, watching, with the most intense satisfaction, the fast-flying wagon-train, and terrified bandits, under Double Dan, pursued by the blood-maddened Apaches.

The Greasers urged their horses away from the wagons, toward the San Miguel, in hopes that the Indians would halt at the train, and thus give them time to escape. Then it was that the terrified slaves were observed by our friends, to clamber from their mules, along the wagon-tongues, and disappear beneath the white tilts. This sight nerved the scout to action.

"Come on, boyees!" he yelled. "We'll save ther wagons an' niggers from ther red hellyuns."

The giant scout drove spurs, followed by the Texans from the Medina, the three young planters, and Roy—he having placed Rosa in the arms of her father—and thus, twelve determined Texans in a line were presented to the view of the Apaches; the whites going in a course to reach the wagon-train, just ahead of the savages.

Perceiving that the force of their foes was now doubled, the Indians were not slow to avoid an encounter, swerving southward directly toward the fast-flying bandits, led by Double Dan.

When the negroes perceived that the Texans had saved them, they sprung from the wagons upon their mules, and brought the train at once to a halt. Then it was that the attention of all was drawn toward the San Miguel.

A hell of sounds and sights that caused the blood to congeal in the veins of the observers, followed the meeting of the Mexicans and the Indians. It was a mingled mass of men and beasts, struggling madly for life, terrible to witness; and the whites heaved sighs of relief when the mad tumult ceased, and they knew that the bandits were all dead, or bound as captives for the torture.

With exultant yells the Apaches now lashed their steeds toward the south, and soon all disappeared from view within the dark shades of the San Miguel bottom timber.

"Now," said Big Foot, "Le Grand an' Antone better say thar pra'rs, fer they'll be tortur'd afore sun-up. Ther band o' yaller cutthroats air all cleaned out, sure an' sartain."

"I reckon we-uns better glide Medina-ways, fer ther circus air over fer ter-night. Sich hefty biz cu'dn't be 'spected ter last long. But I'm feared ther leetle gal won't git over this fer a month o' Sundays."

"God bless you, friend Wallace!" said Roy, feelingly, as he extended his hand, "and all of you, my friends. I shall never forget this night or those who have joined Captain Ray and myself in our search for Rosa."

"Le Grand deserves all the tortures the Apaches may see fit to inflict upon him. But, come, let us join the captain and his daughter."

To describe the joy of Captain Ray, when Rosa was placed in his arms, would be beyond the power of any pen or of the strongest imagination.

The fair girl clung to her father's neck and they both wept tears of joy and thankfulness, and joined in calling down every blessing upon Roy, the scout, and the noble young men who had braved every hardship, and even death, to rescue her from that inhuman fiend, Louis Le Grand.

When the camp was reached all except two of the rancheros, who volunteered to stand watch, rolled themselves in their blankets to restore their overtaxed brains and bodies to sleep, a soft couch being arranged in one of the

wagons for poor Rosa Ray, who fell into a deathlike slumber, while a prayer of most earnest thankfulness was on her lips.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

On the morning following the eventful night, during which our friends passed through so much trouble and anguish, the sun shot up hot, blazing, angrily, as if, maddened at its forced pilgrimage on the opposite side of the world, he was determined to rule all beneath him more tyrannically in consequence.

Within the bandit camp a horrible scene was revealed by the bright, brazen rays—a scene to create horror and aversion most sickening.

But six braves had been left in the camp to guard Le Grand and Captain Antonio, and they, maddened to frenzy by having brought from the plain the corpses of their slain comrades, who had been shot by our friends in their daring rescue of Rosa Ray, had since passed their time in torturing the minds of their captives as much as was possible.

They had driven firmly three stout stakes in the middle of the camp in a line and some five feet apart. To the central stake they had fast bound the right ankle and wrist of one of the captives and the left ankle and wrist of the other, the remaining limbs being fastened to the outer stakes, and thus forcing each man into an X-like position between the stakes. The cords had been drawn tight and the muscles forced into a strained and unnatural position.

This done each of the bandits who had been slain by Big Foot and Roy were cut down from the trees, scalped and stripped of their clothing. Then, after being frightfully mutilated, they were laid in a line, directly at the feet of the two captives. Hardly human looked the mutilated slain as they were thus disposed, hacked and mangled most horribly. The two doomed men, by a dread fascination, could not remove their gaze from the frightful and repulsive scene.

Horrible, too, was the appearance of the captives themselves. The clothing of Le Grand was torn in shreds, his swarthy skin now of an ashen hue, and his eyes bulging from their quivering sockets. His long black hair was tangled, and flowed wildly over his shoulders, while the scratches and bruises, received in his fall from the tree, showed in strong contrast to his pallid skin.

And, Capitan Antonio—oh, Heavens! The sight that he presented was most fearful. Where the ears of the bandit chief had been severed by Roy Randolph, the blood had flowed, and dried, and flowed again, as some fit of passion or exertion had forced the wounds into a fresh hemorrhage. His hair adbered, in snake-like pendants, matted with gore. Unlike Le Grand, the expression upon the bandit's countenance, in place of the craven fear, the abject terror and trembling horror of the miscreant of the Brazos, was defiant and tiger-like. His coarse lips curled upward and downward, away from his teeth, wolf-like, and his facial muscles were drawn tightly.

His black eyes glared and glittered, and the foam flew from between his clinched teeth, as he wrenched at his bonds, and shot out vile oaths, in his fits of fury that, at times, were most terrible to contemplate; while the veins and cords on his visible flesh stood out swollen, and seemed to writhe like serpents beneath his skin.

At times, the bandit would twitch his head quickly, gazing at Le Grand, and the motion would throw his gory locks in a horrible manner about his head; while the hellish bate, and thirst for revenge, that darted from his eyes into those of the man who had brought him to this condition, who was the direct means of the corpses before him being what and where they were—those looks would cause a shriek of terror to burst from the trembling lips of Le Grand, delivered with all the strength within his power. And this would cause the Mexican to give a laugh, so taunting and exultant, as if he was greatly gratified that, even though fast bound and condemned to torture, he could still punish the man who had brought him to such a state.

And the fiendish Apache braves would jeer, and taunt, and yell with joy, to witness the terror of the trembling wretch; as they thrust a pole in the earth near the heads of the slain bandits, upon which they hung the gory scalps of the same.

Time passed, and suddenly long-drawn howls sounded from the plain, a number of braves soon entering the camp with the dead warriors who had been slain in the chase after the Texans—the sight of these causing those in the camp to howl again, and brandish their weapons threateningly.

Then all the slain savages were placed side by side, in plain view of the captives, who now knew that their torture would commence upon the arrival of the main portion of the war-party, which must be soon. Had the miserable wretches been enabled to see beyond the line of trees and undergrowth that shut out a view of the open plain, even Antonio would have shuddered at the sight.

At full speed, the Apaches were now flying

over the plain toward the bandit camp, their eyes glaring, their faces filled with a hellish thirst for revenge, and furious at their defeat, and the death of so many of their number. Their mustangs, as they dashed on in a staggering lunge, showed plainly that they could not keep up the terrible run much longer.

Naked from the waist up; their bronzed arms, breasts, and faces daubed with gypsum, vermilion, and blue pigment, as were even some of the mustangs, their bows and quivers fringed and beaded, hanging at their backs, on they came—the flying of the hoofs through the prairie grass sounding like the rush of a norther.

In the midst of this hellish horde, bound fast to a horse, bare-headed, and bleeding from many wounds, pale as a corpse, was Double Dan—another white victim for the torture.

On galloped the fiendish horde, with howls for the slain at times bursting from their red throats, followed by whoops of triumph as they waved the gory trophies—the scalps of the bandits who had been sent under Double Dan to capture the wagons—over their heads.

Thus on dashed the pirates of the Rio Pecos, the fiends of the llanos, until all, in a mad and yelling mob, darted from the undergrowth into the bandit camp, now a charnel ground, reeking like a slaughter-pen, reeking with human blood!

The recently arrived dead had been laid beside their stark and silent comrades, all now alike stiff and motionless forever.

The feather and trinket-bedizened braves sprung from their mustangs to the earth, their arrows rattling in their quivers, while the younger warriors, who had remained in camp, led the horses to the sunny plain again, lariatting the animals until they were sufficiently cooled off to drink and feed.

A pony was quickly shot, fires kindled, and then the braves tore the scorched horse-meat like famished beasts, the blood dripping from their jaws, the flesh being slashed from the carcass while yet the animal was in its death-struggles.

Although they had lost many braves, they had slain twelve Mexicans and held two whites and a Greaser captive, which was sufficient success to admit of exultation, the torture of a captive being considered equal to many lives.

The mustang upon which Double Dan was bound had been secured to the scalp-pole just opposite the other captives; but as the feast was brought to an end, the superintendent of Le Grand's plantation was roughly jerked to the earth and bound as the others had been, ready for the hellish torture not as yet decided upon.

Then followed the howls, chants, and dances around the dead braves, who were borne away upon the backs of horses during the forenoon and buried from view in some secret place; the Apaches returning in an infuriated state, eager to torture the captives. But after listening to a speech from their chief, which was received with approving yells, they kindled small fires opposite the captives, casting horse-meat into the same, and placing gourds filled with water in front of them. The smell of the burning meat would increase their hunger, and the sight of the water would double their terrible thirst, while the hot sun would scorch their flesh wherever it was exposed, and cause their brains to seem like molten metal.

Thus passed the day—a day of most horrible torture—and when night again approached and the Apaches crawled out from the shades in which they had slept off their fatigue, a half-dozen braves, with huge pieces of horse-meat secured to the ends of lariats, stalked up and down the river bottom, dragging the same upon the sward, and not until a part of that fearful night had passed and the shrieks of panthers mingled with the yelp and howl of wolves, filled the timber—not until then did Double Dan and Le Grand know the meaning of the dragging of the meat.

The horses of the Apaches were all on the plain, as were their equipments, and as the howls of wild beasts sounded the red fiends, with exultant yells, left their captives and were soon heard by them galloping over the prairie, doubtless to scatter desolation and death down the Rio Frio, and then to return in the morning that they might see if their captives had escaped death from the ravenous beasts of the bottom lands.

From either side of Louis Le Grand glared the fiery eyes of Antonio and Double Dan, either of whom would have torn him to pieces as the cause of the fearful position in which they now were.

In fact they were a trio of maniacs, their tongues swollen, their throats parched, their lips cracked and bleeding while hunger gnawed at their vitals; but these sufferings were as naught, when compared with their mental torture and dread.

Words are inadequate to express the horror and excruciating agony that ruled these three wretched men; but Antonio showed it little. His iron will was as yet unbroken, and he hissed words of taunting and hatred at Le Grand and Double Dan; at times calling down curses upon the head of his former employer. But this state of things did not last long.

Fiery eyes of wolves shone horribly from the thickets, and nearer and nearer sounded the blood-curdling shrieks of panthers, as they scented the blood along the sward where the horse-meat had been dragged. At length, growing bolder, the coyotes sprung upon the meatless carcass of the pony, fighting and tearing, their teeth grating upon the bones.

But these cowardly wolves caused no apprehension to the captives, the gaze of the trio being fixed and frozen in horror upon an adjacent tree, a rustling among the branches of which attracted their appalled ears.

Two burning eyes glared down upon them, and a scratching sound chilled their blood, followed by fragments of bark falling to the ground.

Then came a crashing through branches and bushes on the opposite side of the camp, and a sound like that of a heavy body falling upon the earth. The very hair upon the captives' heads seemed to crawl like scorched serpents, and a piercing shriek—yes, shriek after shriek—sprung from the cracked and bleeding lips of each, as the lithe, and supple, and cat-like forms of two huge panthers crept slowly over the sward, from the dark shades on either side; the eyes of the beasts like coals of fire, their tails lashing their sides, and the white teeth gleaming from their parted lips.

Better far, if the captives wished to prolong their miserable lives, had they remained silent, and refrained from writhing at their bonds; for the panthers might then have satisfied their appetites upon the flesh of the corpses, and left those erect, strong figures free from their terrible fangs and claws.

However, the shrieks and writhing incensed the beasts, as a struggling object ever does anything of the cat species; and, gathering their lithe forms, they bounded forward simultaneously, while the yells of horror from the doomed wretches filled the air, causing the coyotes to dart with fear into the thickets.

Then followed a horrible tearing of flesh, and crunching of bones, with gasping and half-smothered cries of mortal dread, a wrenching of stakes from the earth, and fierce and terrible struggling.

The four stakes no longer stood upright, neither did the three human forms; but where the trio had been bound were the two terrible beasts tearing with teeth and claws, their victims!

Death, most horrible in form! The panthers ruled the bandit camp. And the silvery moon rolled on, smiling placidly down, as ever, upon the blood-smeared sward and mangled men; its rays reflected in the glassy and sightless eyes of the trio of miscreants and murderers—Louis Le Grand, Capitan Antonio, and Double Dan!

Rosa Ray and Roy Randolph had been terribly avenged!

CHAPTER XXXIV. AFTER THE STORM.

THREE months after the terrible and startling events which ended in the rescue of Rosa Ray, and the horrible death of the trio of miscreants who had caused her such sufferings, or had been parties to the same, the crescent of magnolias, as well as the mansion of Captain Ray, and the boat-landing, were illuminated by hundreds of Chinese lanterns.

The exhilarating strains of a band of music, that floated through the balmy, perfumed air indicated, as did the illumination and the gayly attired ladies and gentlemen who promenaded the gardens, an important occasion. And, indeed, taking time and place into consideration, there was evidently a very grand affair in progress.

Upon the front piazza, in her easy-chair, sat aunt Roxie, the very personification of peace, joy, and contentment; now listening intently to a narration of some of the details connected with the rescue of her pet and niece—the narrator being none other than Big Foot Wallace, who, to use his own words, "war lunged furdur inter civilize than he'd ever skuted afore, er ever 'tended ter ag'in; an' which he wouldn't ha' did fer any other human 'ceptin' Rosa an' Roy."

Near to this couple stood Captain Ray, conversing with a number of the neighboring planters, and as happy as a school-boy at vacation, while the clerical appearance of a gentleman thumbing a book in the doorway, indicated that some ceremony was about to be performed that called for the services of a clergyman. The nature of this ceremony might have been readily guessed from the appearance of five beautiful maidens in the hall, attired in spotless white.

In company with these young ladies, and acting as most attentive cavaliers, were the five young planters, the ex-comrades of Louis Le Grand, who had played such a prominent part in the hunt after their leader, when his true character had become known to them, in all its dastardly hideousness, cowardice, and criminality.

The two who had been sent for the ransom money by Antonio, had been met by their friends as they were returning; and a most joyous meeting it was to all, while they thanked their stars that Big Foot Wallace had happened

on the Frio, thus bringing matters to a crisis before they could return with the money—return, only to be waylaid, robbed, and murdered by the bandits.

Not long were the parties we have mentioned thus positioned; for the sound of a galloping horse drew every one from the gardens to the portico, and the next moment Roy Randolph dashed up, and instantly alighted. He was greeted warmly upon all sides, and especially by the old scout, aunt Roxie, and Captain Ray; the latter regarding him with a pride that was most noticeable.

Gazing earnestly and longingly through an open window into the parlor, Roy presently sprung through the same, to be met by the one true and loving darling of his heart; who, bright, fresh, and beautiful as a rose, sprung into his arms.

A very short time after Roy's arrival, the marriage-party assembled, took their places, and the ceremony was performed, agreeably to Rosa's request, beneath the fragrant magnolias. There, later on, a bounteous repast was spread for the many guests, while music floated through the evening air; Big Foot Wallace being forced to occupy the seat of honor, next the bride.

It was at a late hour that the party broke up; many of the guests remaining at the mansion, as their homes were some distance away.

The midnight hour found our hero and heroine standing at the boat-landing—a spot ever to be held sacred by them both, as from it Rosa had first seen Roy, apparently dead, floating down the moonlit bosom of the Brazos.

In closing, gentle reader, we have but a few remarks to make, explanatory of this tale of Southwestern life.

Captain Ray had from the moment that he first started on the trail of his loved and only child, felt that her rescue depended entirely upon Roy Randolph; but, though he noted the energy, skill, and interest of the latter, not for a moment did he imagine that the young man was engaged in a labor of love.

Not even when Roy had rescued Rosa from the Apaches and galloped away with her, did the old man have a thought in regard to his oft-repeated vow that no man should steal the love of his only child.

But on the trail back from San Antonio, when the mind of the captain was more settled, he observed enough not only to convince him that Roy and Rosa loved each other, but to compel him to admit that they appeared created for each other. So he put aside his jealousy and was thankful that his darling had found a man who was worthy of her.

Then the time came when they not only confessed their love, but revealed the fact to Captain Ray, that they had met and loved before Rosa had been abducted by Le Grand.

Captain Ray was astonished beyond measure at the confession made to him, but it increased—if such a thing were possible—his love for and pride in his daughter, and when the strange events were generally known, every one asserted that Rosa was a fitting mate for the daring, dashing, handsome and gentlemanly Roy Randolph.

The captain would not listen to Roy in regard to the latter carrying on a separate establishment.

He declared that he could not survive it, if Rosa left him; so Roy disposed of his plantation, and made the Bend his home.

Aunt Roxie was greatly rejoiced, and declared that she felt twenty years younger when her niece returned.

Big Foot Wallace could not be prevailed upon to linger on the Lower Brazos, especially after some joking remarks of Rosa in connection with aunt Roxie. To such an extent was the giant scout frightened by the bare suggestion, that he left immediately; the bride declaring that he was "real mean" to take a joke so seriously.

The wagons, mules, and slaves of Le Grand were sold, and the proceeds divided among his many creditors; and his ex-comrades settled down into respectable and honest men, marrying and becoming honorable members of society.

Big Foot Wallace yet lives, is one of the king bordermen of the great Southwest, and the writer looks back, with pride and pleasure, upon the time when he was a "prairie pard" of the Giant Scout of the Lone Star State.

Roy and Rosa, with their children around them, live at the beautiful Bend, and are prosperous and happy as the day is long; although a great grief has befallen them in the death of Captain Ray, as well as in that of aunt Roxie, both of whom were laid to rest in their last and narrow home, beneath the magnolias.

And, although many years have come and gone, Rosa Randolph is still a beautiful woman; but she lays no claim to her old distinctive title, for her eldest daughter is now known as—

"The Belle of the Brazos."

THE END.

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